

Bio-Psycho-Social Challenges Experienced by South African Youth Triggering Suicidal Ideation: A Case of Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Suicidality in youth is a growing concern and is currently a public health issue in South Africa, Eastern Cape province and the province with limited resources. South Africa is among the top countries with a high suicide mortality rate globally. Hence this study sought to investigate the challenges faced by suicidal African youth. The research was exploratory, a qualitative research method was adopted, and non-probability and judgemental sampling was chosen. Ten (10) individuals with para-suicidal ideation were selected as participants for this research. Data was collected using open-ended interviews. A thematic approach was used in data analysis. The findings suggest that mental disorders, socio-economic challenges, biological factors, family problems, bullying and peer victimisation are some of the contributing factors to suicidal attempts. The study recommends paying attention to the warning signs of suicide in individuals. Mental illnesses stemming from socio-economic conditions, infidelity, and other root causes of suicidal ideation are prevalent in this country, particularly among young people who are disproportionately affected. Providing relevant support and conducting more awareness campaigns among young people are essential steps forward. This article offers academic perspectives on the challenges encountered by a large proportion of young individuals in South Africa who are impacted by socio-economic difficulties, alongside examining the government's involvement.

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Publication History

Received: 13th May, 2024

Accepted: 8th August, 2024

Published online:

5th September, 2024

Keywords: *Suicide, African Youth, Mental Health, Socio-Economic Challenges, Mental Disorder, Inequality.*

INTRODUCTION

The study aims to investigate mental health problems experienced by youth in the Eastern Cape, focusing on East London as a sample. Discrimination leads to mental disorders triggered by stigma, stereotyping, perception, myths, and superstitions, all of which are associated with suicidal ideation. Section 9 of the South African constitution prohibits grounds for discrimination.¹ Despite South Africa's well-crafted constitution, the country remains in the top ranks of countries with high cases of inequality and discriminatory practices in the world, with half of all South Africans continuing to live in poverty.² Youth

¹ M. Mswela and M. Nöthling-Slabbert, Colour discrimination against persons with albinism in South Africa. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 6(1) (2013). doi: DOI:10.7196/SAJBL.236.

² David Francis and Edward Webster, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Critical Reflections," *Development Southern Africa* 36, no. 6 (2019): 788–802.

face growing challenges in their efforts to assimilate into social and economic spheres.³ It is imperative for social welfare programs to safeguard fundamental human rights, advance equal opportunities, and involve every individual.⁴

Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15-29 globally.⁵ In South Africa, suicide is the leading cause of disability, with one in five young people considering committing suicide, and men being the most affected.⁶ The South African Depression and Anxiety Group in 2022 revealed a disconcerting statistic, indicating that 9% of young individuals who attempted suicide were successful. Therefore, investigating suicide in Southern Africa is imperative to effectively address its underlying causes.⁷ Low-income countries such as South Africa account for 78% of the documented suicide rate, with black South Africans comprising 75–78% of the suicide mortality rate due to systematically segregated healthcare systems and treatment barriers exacerbated by the consequences of apartheid.⁸

Thornton et al. further posit that when three risk factors are combined—psychological suffering and hopelessness, disconnection, and the capacity to attempt suicide—suicide advances from suicidal ideation to suicide attempt.⁹ A compassionate, enduring, and equitable society can only be constructed through social welfare interventions that tackle the estrangement and exclusion of extensive portions of the populace.¹⁰ While well-being initiatives should be accessible to all South Africans, the emphasis should be on the impoverished, the vulnerable, and those with unique requirements.¹¹

The terms suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, and suicide are defined by Klonsky et al. as follows: suicidal ideation is the act of thinking about, considering, or planning suicide; attempted suicide is defined as nonfatal, self-directed, potentially harmful behaviour with the intent to die, even if the behaviour does not result in injury and suicide is defined as self-directed behaviour that results in death.¹² Factors such as unemployment, schizophrenia, abuse, experience of conflict, feelings of isolation, and a lonely life were found to be triggering factors for anxiety leading to suicide attempts and completed suicide.¹³

Certainly, suicide represents a grave global public health concern, significantly contributing to South Africa's mortality rates, as evidenced by the persistent increase in suicide attempts among young individuals.¹⁴ Indeed, societal challenges such as unemployment, which often precipitates depression, emerge as key factors contributing to para-suicide attempts among African youth.¹⁵ The well-documented severe poverty experienced by South African youth,¹⁶ impacting crime rates, is palpable in the para-suicide statistics.¹⁷

Evidently, the ongoing economic challenges in South Africa are fostering chromophobia among youth, exacerbating vulnerabilities and leading to suicidal behaviors.¹⁸ Moreover, the daily challenges of gender-based violence and toxic relationships among South African youth significantly contribute to para-

³ Francis and Webster, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Critical Reflections."

⁴ South African Government, *White Paper For Social Welfare*. Pretoria: South African Government, 1997. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/whitepaperonsocialwelfare0.pdf

⁵ Nelisiwe Khuzwayo, Myra Taylor, and Christina Connolly, "High Risk of Suicide among High-School Learners in UMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa," *South African Medical Journal* 108, no. 6 (2018): 517–23.

⁶ Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connolly, "High Risk of Suicide among High-School Learners in UMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa."

⁷ Tahira Kootbodien et al., "Trends in Suicide Mortality in South Africa, 1997 to 2016," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 6 (2020): 1850.

⁸ Brendan Jamal Thornton, "Victims of Illicit Desire: Pentecostal Men of God and the Specter of Sexual Temptation," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2018, 133–71.

⁹ Thornton, "Victims of Illicit Desire: Pentecostal Men of God and the Specter of Sexual Temptation."

¹⁰ South African Government, *White Paper For Social Welfare*.

¹¹ South African Government, *White Paper For Social Welfare*.

¹² E David Klonsky, Alexis M May, and Boaz Y Saffer, "Suicide, Suicide Attempts, and Suicidal Ideation," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2016): 307–30.

¹³ Oluseun P Ogunnubi et al., "From Ideation to Attempt: A Study of Suicidality and Its Correlates amongst Patients with Schizophrenia in a Resource-Poor Country," *South African Journal of Psychiatry* 28 (2022): 1547.

¹⁴ Becky Mars et al., "Suicidal Behaviour across the African Continent: A Review of the Literature," *BMC Public Health* 14 (2014): 1–14.

¹⁵ Robin E McGee and Nancy J Thompson, "Peer Reviewed: Unemployment and Depression among Emerging Adults in 12 States, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2010," *Preventing Chronic Disease* 12 (2015).

¹⁶ Francis and Webster, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Critical Reflections."

¹⁷ Renier Steyn, "Poverty, Agency and Suicide: Men and Women," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 5, no.1(2023): 1–11.

¹⁸ William A Calvo-Quirós, "The Politics of Color (Re) Significations: Chromophobia, Chromo-Eugenics, and the Epistemologies of Taste," *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 2013, 76–116.

suicide rates.¹⁹ Research unequivocally indicates that the nation's pervasive corruption and discrimination exacerbate inequality, resulting in poor service delivery, job loss, minimal job creation, and high unemployment rates, particularly affecting the youth demographic.²⁰ These multifaceted factors serve as triggers for suicidal behavior among South African youth. This study aims to delve into the challenges encountered by African youth prone to suicidal tendencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Milner et al. assert that unemployment causes mental disorders, mental health deteriorates after losing a job, and these mental disorders are intermediaries between suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, exacerbated by job search. Statistics South Africa reported a concerning statistic, indicating that South Africa's unemployment rate was 32.9% in the first quarter of 2023, among the highest in the world. The White Paper for Social Welfare guides the Department of Social Development program of action, stating that social welfare programs will be integrated into an intersectoral strategy aimed at addressing structural poverty and improving human capacity, including the creation of employment opportunities, in cooperation with other governmental departments and civil society stakeholders.²¹

Therefore, it can be observed from this information by Segal and Baumohl that social work encompasses the entirety of interpersonal relationships and the surrounding contexts in which they occur.²² Socioeconomic factors are particularly influential in determining both mental health disorders and the effectiveness of mental health policies and services.²³ Many suicides happen impulsively in moments of crisis with a breakdown in the ability to deal with life stresses such as relationship break-up, chronic pain plus illness, and financial problems, among others.²⁴ Toxic relationships of any kind lead to conflict, shame, worthlessness, feelings of betrayal, resentment, and loss of emotional resilience.²⁵

These factors result in suicidal thoughts and consequently suicide attempts in people who lack family support, friendship, and psychosocial support.²⁶ The World Health Organization conducted an in-depth study in 2021, finding that suicide rates are also high among vulnerable groups who experience discrimination, including indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ individuals, and prisoners.²⁷ The development of mental disorders is influenced by a multitude of social factors, leading to the tendency to equate social well-being with mental well-being.²⁸

Awareness about mental health, including its connection to the suicide mortality rate among South African youth, has been deliberately on the rise in South Africa.²⁹ The Carnegie Two highlights the importance of poverty as a profoundly systematic political strategy, measuring its significance by the damage it inflicts on individuals, particularly black individuals who endure it.³⁰ Bantjes et al. postulate that a growing corpus of literature documents the relationship between suicide and socioeconomic variables, such as poverty and financial crises.³¹

However, there's an urgent need to investigate the role these factors play in suicidal behavior.³² Given the ambiguous consequences of corruption, such as inadequate resources and diversion of resources from core

¹⁹ Ismael Puig-Amores, Isabel Cuadrado-Gordillo, and Guadalupe Martín-Mora-Parra, "Suicidal Behaviour as an Emerging Factor in Female Victims of Gender-Based Violence within a Relationship: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 22 (2022): 15340.

²⁰ Marichen Van der Westhuizen and Ignatius Swart, "The Struggle against Poverty, Unemployment and Social Injustice in Present-Day South Africa: Exploring the Involvement of the Dutch Reformed Church at Congregational Level," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): 731–59.

²¹ South African Government, *White Paper For Social Welfare*.

²² S. Segal and J. Baumohl, "Social work practice in community mental health." *Social Work Journal*, 1, (2021).

²³ Charlotte Hawkins, John M Bwanika, and Martin Ibanda, "Socio-Economic Factors Associated with Mental Health Disorders in Fort Portal, Western Uganda," *South African Journal of Psychiatry* 26 (2020).

²⁴ World Health Organization, *Promoting Physical Activity through Schools: A Toolkit* (World Health Organization, 2021).

²⁵ Masoud Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study," *BMC Psychiatry* 23, no. 1 (2023): 50.

²⁶ Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study."

²⁷ World Health Organization, *Promoting Physical Activity through Schools: A Toolkit*.

²⁸ Segal and J. Baumohl, "Social work practice in community mental health."

²⁹ Francis and Webster, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Critical Reflections."

³⁰ Francis and Webster, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Critical Reflections."

³¹ J. Bantjes, et.al., "Mental health and academic failure among first-year university students in South Africa." *South African Journal of Psychology*, 51(3) (2020). doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246320963204

³² Bantjes, et.al., "Mental health and academic failure among first-year university students in South Africa."

business delivery, a clear relation to mental disorders can be drawn.³³ Adoption of a qualitative research approach is imperative in understanding and interpreting how and why suicidal behaviors exist, including how many people undertake the behavior.³⁴ Qualitative approaches are useful for in-depth studies of unknown phenomena, and suicidal behavior is a matter that needs to be scientifically understood.³⁵

Khoshknab et al. further reiterate that social workers must focus on specific aspects of suicidal behavior, including a comprehensive understanding of suicide prevention strategies and reinforcing policies.³⁶ Furthermore, the role of social workers in community mental health is embedded in the broader relationship of people to social institutions.³⁷ Social workers engage in the domain of official institutions of care and regulation; are preoccupied with the societal, psychological, and legal aspects of the household; and have developed a growing fascination with the day-to-day support networks that operate among companions and acquaintances.³⁸ The study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by suicidal African youth.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are utilized to study behavior, feelings, and disorders.³⁹ In the collection of data, only one researcher was involved, supervised by social workers in the agency. The researcher relied on transcripts and recordings for data collection, and then later identified which theme each sentiment from the participant belonged to. Most participants used IsiXhosa during the data collection sessions, which the researcher later translated into English. Translation and reviewing of transcripts or recordings were done a maximum of 8 times by the researcher, acquaintances, and the research supervisor.

Study setting

The study was conducted in the Eastern Cape, a province marked by significant poverty in South Africa. Within this province lies the Buffalo Metro, home to a substantial number of patients at Frere Tertiary Hospital, where the research took place. Additionally, due to inadequate resources in local health facilities and subpar service delivery, patients from the O.R. Tambo District were also included in the investigation. The study focused on para-suicidal South African youth admitted to Frere Tertiary Hospital for self-poisoning. These individuals, aged between 18 and 35 years, had progressed beyond the acute phase of their condition, awaiting psychosocial assessment, and were conscious and willing to share their experiences, which were integral to the study's findings. All interviews were conducted in social work offices to ensure privacy and encourage patients to freely express themselves.

Data collection

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure maximum diversity across various demographic variables, including age, gender, employment status, religion, marital status, and education level. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. Semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth, individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather data. The interviews typically lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were held in the Social Work department of Frere Tertiary Hospital, during the patients' psychosocial evaluation phase. A total of 10 interviews were conducted.

Key questions included inquiries such as, "What led to your hospitalisation?", "What triggered your suicidal actions?", and "Could you please describe the events leading up to your suicide attempt?" or

³³ E. Glynn, "Corruption in the health sector: A problem in need of a systems-thinking approach." *Frontiers of Public Health* (2022). doi:10.3389/fpubh.2022.910073

³⁴ Jane Sutton and Zubin Austin, "Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management," *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 68, no. 3 (2015): 226.

³⁵ Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study."

³⁶ Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study."

³⁷ Segal and J. Baumohl, "Social work practice in community mental health."

³⁸ Segal and J. Baumohl, "Social work practice in community mental health."

³⁹ M. Plow and M. Golding, "A Qualitative Study of Multiple Health Behaviors in Adults with Multiple Sclerosis." *International Journal of MS Care*, 18(5), (2016). doi:10.7224/1537-2073.2015-065

"What were your emotions before and after your attempt?" Additional follow-up questions were based on the participants' initial responses, and aimed at seeking clarification or further elaboration.

Data analysis

The data analysis approach followed the method outlined by Bless et al.⁴⁰ All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed either during or after the interview sessions. Transcripts underwent multiple reviews to achieve a comprehensive understanding, involving interpretation and correction of any inaccuracies as needed. The transcripts were then segmented into themes, categories, and sub-categories, which were subsequently summarised. Repetition of information from the transcripts ensured the accuracy of the data obtained, continuing until both the researcher and participants achieved a shared understanding of the concepts under discussion.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, four criteria—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—were rigorously adhered to. Most of the time and effort was dedicated to data collection, interviews, and conducting peer checks. Additionally, member checks were performed to validate the credibility of the data. Supervisors thoroughly reviewed the transcripts and recordings to maintain dependability. To ensure confirmability, the researcher meticulously documented all stages of the study, including data collection, ethical considerations, analysis procedures, and findings, allowing for external evaluation by readers.

Member checks were conducted by summarising the analysed interviews and returning them to the participants to verify the accuracy of the emerged categories/sub-categories, thereby ensuring the dependability of the data. Peer checks were conducted by engaging supervisors in detailed discussions regarding the emerging data throughout the research process. Furthermore, the study limitations, data collection methods, analysis techniques, participant selection criteria, and participant demographics were clearly articulated to enhance the transferability of the study findings, enabling other researchers to replicate and build upon the study.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical certification (REC/23f/2019) was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Frere Tertiary Hospital. Walter Sisulu University's ethics committee gave consent for the collection of data. Additional precautions were taken to ensure ethical conduct throughout the study. These precautions included disseminating information regarding the rights of participants, such as their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were provided with a clear understanding of the research objectives and were asked for their consent to record the interviews. The researcher collected data under the supervision of a registered social worker from the institution, despite the researcher also being a social worker. During the data collection process, counseling was conducted by both the researcher and the registered social worker. All participants were interviewed during their acute phase. Details regarding confidentiality and its limitations were also communicated, assuring participants of the secure handling of recorded information.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Themes of this research include the following: Unemployment; financial challenges; death of a breadwinner; gender-based violence; and emotional failure (cheating). Suicidal behavior from the idea to the attempt is influenced by certain factors. These are the driving factors depending on the type of person. Reasons for suicide are understood as a problem that the person is faced with, which leads to the conclusion that the right to life enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa is being violated. This sub-theme includes categories of unemployment, death of a breadwinner, financial challenges, Gender-Based Violence, and emotional failure -infidelity-.

Ten individuals who had experienced suicidal ideation and resorted to self-poisoning as a method of attempting suicide were selected as participants for the study. These participants were interviewed

⁴⁰ C. Bless, C. Higson-Smith, and S. L. Sithole, *Fundamentals of Social Research Methods An African Perspective*. Juta. (1988). https://www.google.co.za/books/edition/Fundamentals_of_Social_Research_Methods/gDdOmQEACAAJ?hl=en

during the acute phase of their condition. The sample consisted of five males and five females, all aged between 18 and 35 years. Among them, six participants were single, three were married, and one was a widow. The categories and sub-categories utilized in this research were derived from existing bodies of literature and research, as well as extracted from the participants' in-depth descriptions during the interviews.

The theme of the impact of the challenges faced by suicidal South African youth.

The table represents the demographic information of participants:

Name	Age	Gender	Marital status	Level of education	Number of Children	Period suffering from suicidal ideology	Employ status
Chris	28	Female	Widow	Grade 11	2	1 month	Unemployed
Lee	30	Male	Married	Bachelor's degree	1	3 weeks	Employed
Kim	18	Female	Single	Grade 12 and Undergraduate	0	1 month	Unemployed
Asa	30	Female	Married	Grade 11	4	6 months	Unemployed
Mat	25	Mal	Single	Bachelor's degree	1	1 year	Unemployed
Lorraine	20	Male	Single	Grade 12 and undergraduate	0	2 days	Unemployed
Onela	18	Female	Single	Grade 12 student	0	9 months	Unemployed
Awam	16	Female	Single	Grade 10	0	2 weeks	Unemployed
Lonwabo	25	Male	Single	Grade 12	2	1 month	Employed
Siso	35	Male	Married	Grade 12	2	4 months	Employed

Theme One - Financial challenges

Financial difficulties often signify an individual's inability to meet specific monetary obligations, whether due to personal preferences or the necessity to fulfill essential survival needs. Experiencing destitution and lacking financial resources can evoke intense feelings of fear, anxiety, or depression.⁴¹ Khalaf underscores the impact of media on thoughts and emotions, particularly regarding aspirations to escape poverty through education and other means.⁴² Craig et al. further suggest that financial struggles may lead to suicide attempts, especially among males, accompanied by feelings of worthlessness and disgrace.⁴³

One participant cited financial challenges as the primary reason for suicidal ideation:

"I have not been honest to my wife about our financial status in our family. She loves shopping in Thailand and that lifestyle makes her happy. I allow her to do so. My ex-wife is now married to my best friend. We ended up using the business money and the business is now failing. Telling her about all this may start an argument. In such a conversation I may end up not feeling like a man."

⁴¹ Ashleigh Craig et al., "The Prevalence of Probable Depression and Probable Anxiety, and Associations with Adverse Childhood Experiences and Socio-Demographics: A National Survey in South Africa," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022): 986531.

⁴² Abderrahman M Khalaf et al., "The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review," *Cureus* 15, no. 8 (2023).

⁴³ Craig et al., "The Prevalence of Probable Depression and Probable Anxiety, and Associations with Adverse Childhood Experiences and Socio-Demographics: A National Survey in South Africa."

Despite finding contentment in their surroundings, individuals may face financial constraints hindering their desired lifestyle.⁴⁴ The cultural background in Africa imposes its own demands,⁴⁵ prompting some to borrow money without repayment, resulting in ridicule, shame, and insults from others. For many, financial crises have persisted since youth, with a desire to break free from this cycle and attain a better standard of living:

"I do believe if I was not from a poor background my life would have been much easier. I would not have to maintain myself and my family at the same time. I ended up borrowing money for things then I ended up getting it to go out which is fun. Now I have to avoid people and I feel like at times some of the people are mocking mostly after one of the people I owe posted our chats."

Poverty has long been associated with poor health outcomes, triggering suicidal behavior.⁴⁶ Approximately 40.0% of South Africans were living below the upper-bound poverty line.⁴⁷ Additionally, debt can also be recognized as a root cause of suffering.⁴⁸ For South Africans who are in debt, the percentage sits at 75.44%.⁴⁹

Theme Two - Emotional failure (Infidelity)

Another classification is emotional breakdown, which pertains to the impairment of interpersonal, romantic,⁵⁰ or close relationships that hold paramount importance to individuals.⁵¹ Disturbance of this can lead to emotional chaos, conflict and interpersonal disputes and the resulting feelings of emotional trauma, embarrassment, and shame, which lead to suicide attempts in this sample.⁵² When one partner realises that the other partner has been involved in other romantic relationships, the victim experiences a complete emotional breakdown and emotional paralysis.⁵³

This particular scenario encapsulates a range of intense emotions such as a profound sense of being let down or deceived,⁵⁴ a tendency to attribute blame and fault to oneself, a pervasive feeling of lacking value or significance, as well as the experience of being publicly shamed or humiliated.⁵⁵ Each of these enumerated elements possesses the potential to give rise to the contemplation or even the execution of self-inflicted harm, particularly among the male population, regardless of their marital status.

"We were at the club with my friends enjoying ourselves. One of them saw my partner in the VIP section which was okay at first. As the night went by, I saw her leaving. So, I then decided to go and salute her. Before I could do that, I saw her getting into a C-Class Mercedes Benz with one guy. My Friends also saw this. I tried to call her, she said she would call me when she got to her room. After 20 minutes I tried to call her, but her phone was off. My friends accompanied me to her room and she was not there. When I got into my room I drank some battery acid."

⁴⁴ Peter Walla et al., "Brain Activities Show There Is Nothing Like a Real Friend in Contrast to Influencers and Other Celebrities," *Brain Sciences* 13, no. 5 (2023): 831.

⁴⁵ Robert W Kates and Partha Dasgupta, "African Poverty: A Grand Challenge for Sustainability Science," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 43 (2007): 16747–50.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Frankham, Thomas Richardson, and Nick Maguire, "Psychological Factors Associated with Financial Hardship and Mental Health: A Systematic Review," *Clinical Psychology Review* 77 (2020): 101832.

⁴⁷ Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), "General Household Survey 2019," 2019, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Hayley A Hamilton et al., "Debt Stress, Psychological Distress and Overall Health among Adults in Ontario," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 111 (2019): 89–95.

⁴⁹ A. O'Niell, Statista. *South Africa: National debt in relation to gross domestic product (GDP) from 2019 to 2029*.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/578887/national-debt-of-south-africa-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>

⁵⁰ Lacey J Ritter, Taylor Hilliard, and David Knox, "'Lovesick': Mental Health and Romantic Relationships among College Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 1 (2022): 641.

⁵¹ Kharah M Ross et al., "Close Relationships and Health: The Interactive Effect of Positive and Negative Aspects," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 13, no. 6 (2019): e12468.

⁵² Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study."

⁵³ Annie Temane et al., "Lived Experiences of Couples in a Relationship Where One Partner Is Diagnosed with a Mental Illness," *Curationis* 42, no. 1 (2019): 1–7.

⁵⁴ Mark R Leary, "Emotional Responses to Interpersonal Rejection," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 17, no. 4 (2015): 435–41.

⁵⁵ Anna Saya et al., "Positive and Psycho-Pathological Aspects between Shame and Shamelessness," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 941576.

"I was in my room coming from work when he informed me that he was going out for drinks. Normally, when he is out, we text but that night he would rarely text me. A friend of mine informed me she just saw him passing with a girl in the car. I panicked, felt weak, and was triggered to go there. When I got there, I saw what I wanted to see then decided to go home."

Theme Three - Bereavement

Another category is the death of a breadwinner, which refers to the euphemism for the death of a person who earns money to support his/her family, which may sometimes be the only one capable of supporting the family. Bonthuys additionally explicates that this circumstance imposes a weighty responsibility upon the affectionate individuals who remain, as they are compelled to discover alternative means of subsistence, acclimate themselves to the unfamiliar surroundings, and cope with the psychological distress stemming from the demise.⁵⁶

The previously mentioned create stressors such as financial stress, emotional stress, and psychological trauma.⁵⁷ Furthermore, these individuals must simultaneously struggle with metathesis phobia without receiving intermittent bereavement support/counseling, as this is taboo among indigenous peoples.

"My Husband was the one supporting us in everything. We have two toddlers, both in private school, and I have never thought of looking for a job. His getting shot in the money cash heist made me realise that I have to look for means to make money to continue supporting the kids. The younger one keeps on asking when his father is coming back, that gets to me every time and I have to deal with family members' drama at times. I have to also deal with continuing to build our home."

"Before my parents died everything was okay. They would from time to time look after me including life challenges. Mostly, my mom would text me. When she died everything changed and everything started to be too much for me."

The death of an individual who used to provide for the family presents financial-related mental health problems to the dependents.⁵⁸ The sudden change of events for dependents and the necessity to find survival, means creating stressors for them.⁵⁹ The environment is not friendly for job seekers in South Africa.⁶⁰

Theme Four - Unemployment

One of the classifications within the research pertains to unemployment, which refers to the state of individuals lacking employment opportunities. Some individuals define it as the absence of a designated space for responsibility, typically involving a commitment of at least seven hours and reporting to higher authorities, regardless of the time of day. This definition excludes those who are self-employed. Unemployment often leads to feelings of depression, emotional exhaustion, mental strain, and, in some cases, instability.⁶¹

"My husband was the only one working. Now I have to look for a job or be self-employed. I have tried to sell a few things in my home. I have tried looking for a job, but I have no luck. The entire

⁵⁶ Elsje Bonthuys, "Death of the Breadwinner and the Continuation of the Duty of Spousal Support: Discrepancies and Inequalities for Different Categories of Surviving Partners," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 23, no. 1 (2020).

⁵⁷ Bonthuys, "Death of the Breadwinner and the Continuation of the Duty of Spousal Support: Discrepancies and Inequalities for Different Categories of Surviving Partners."

⁵⁸ Bonthuys, "Death of the Breadwinner and the Continuation of the Duty of Spousal Support: Discrepancies and Inequalities for Different Categories of Surviving Partners."

⁵⁹ Bonthuys, "Death of the Breadwinner and the Continuation of the Duty of Spousal Support: Discrepancies and Inequalities for Different Categories of Surviving Partners."

⁶⁰ William Manga Mokofe, "Employment Implications for Naturalized South African Citizens," *Int'l JL Changing World* 2 (2023): 16.

⁶¹ McGee and Thompson, "Peer Reviewed: Unemployment and Depression among Emerging Adults in 12 States, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2010."

experience has not been easy for me with all these adjustments I have to make. The whole experience is new to me."

Unemployment can significantly impact individuals, particularly during post-graduation periods, as highlighted by McGee.⁶² For many, education is seen as the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, with success often considered secondary. Education plays a central role in the pursuit of gainful employment, allowing individuals to improve their socioeconomic status, dress fashionably, and own desirable vehicles.⁶³ When these aspirations remain unfulfilled, individuals often experience frustration, despair, and fear.

"What gets to me is based on the fact that I did what I thought would benefit my family. It hurts to wake up in the morning and do nothing. Watch your family continue to suffer. Sometimes you can see others gossiping about you and your condition. You get to understand why people give up because the suffering is beyond some of us."

Unemployed youth aged 15-34 years increased by 241,000 to 4.9 million.⁶⁴ The suicide rate continues to increase in South Africa, and there's a lack of mental health facilities.⁶⁵ Unemployment of psychosocial agents with skills to deal with mental disorders contributes to the mental health problems faced by South Africa.⁶⁶

Theme Five – Gender-Based Violence

One of the categories within this comprehensive framework is Gender-Based Violence, which encompasses various forms of abuse or harm inflicted upon individuals based on their gender identification. This abuse can manifest in different ways, including sexual, emotional, and physical violence.⁶⁷ Individuals subjected to such traumatic experiences are at a heightened risk of developing suicidal ideation, characterized by distressing thoughts of self-harm or ending one's own life.⁶⁸

"At times he shouts at me using vulgar language. This year I decided to relocate my kids to avoid this constant abuse they observe or experience. Earlier this month I almost died due to strangulation. After years of him doing this to me, he started to cheat live and every day beats me telling me to leave the place and I have nowhere to go. Each day it gets worse. Yes, I am thinking of opening a case, but he is the one who provides for the home. I thought things would be better if I just died."

"My boyfriend randomly becomes physical even if he's not drunk but randomly does that. Now in my area, it is something that is known and discussed I am assuming. Even the slightest things become an issue and end up being told that he feeds me, etc. I tried to end things, but they became worse. I have tried to inform him about his way of doing things which hurt me."

Gender-based violence is an act that has psychological consequences for victims.⁶⁹ These can lead to post-traumatic disorder and eventually suicidal ideation.⁷⁰

⁶² McGee and Thompson, "Peer Reviewed: Unemployment and Depression among Emerging Adults in 12 States, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2010."

⁶³ McGee and Thompson, "Peer Reviewed: Unemployment and Depression among Emerging Adults in 12 States, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2010."

⁶⁴ Statistics South Africa, "P0318 - General Household Survey (GHS), 2022. Republic of South Africa," 2023, https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1856&PPN=P0318&SCH=73619.

⁶⁵ Nkechinyere C Edeh and Chiedu Eseadi, "Mental Health Implications of Suicide Rates in South Africa," *World Journal of Clinical Cases* 11, no. 34 (2023): 8099.

⁶⁶ R. Skhosana, "The Dilemma Faced By Npos In Retaining Social Workers: A Call To Revisit The Retention Strategy". *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 56(2) (2020). doi: <https://doi.org/10.15270/56-2-815>

⁶⁷ Zlatka Rakovec-Felser, "Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationship from Public Health Perspective," *Health Psychology Research* 2, no. 3 (2014).

⁶⁸ Rakovec-Felser, "Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationship from Public Health Perspective."

⁶⁹ Jerusalem Sewalem and Alemayehu Molla, "Mental Distress and Associated Factors among Women Who Experienced Gender Based Violence and Attending Court in South Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study," *BMC Women's Health* 22, no. 1 (2022): 187.

⁷⁰ Sewalem and Molla, "Mental Distress and Associated Factors among Women Who Experienced Gender Based Violence and Attending Court in South Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study."

DISCUSSION

The study findings underscore the significant contribution of financial difficulties to suicidal attempts among young people in South Africa.⁷¹ Alabi elucidates that the experiences and perceptions of research participants provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between economic hardships and suicidal tendencies within this demographic.⁷² Economic challenges play a central role in suicidal attempts,⁷³ inducing intense emotions such as fear, anxiety, and depression, which in turn fuel suicidal thoughts and actions.⁷⁴ Ao highlights a correlation between poverty rates and suicide among children aged 10 to 19, attributing this to exposure to factors like abuse and stress, limited opportunities, depression, and disparities in accessing mental health services.⁷⁵

Emotional failure, particularly related to infidelity, also contributes significantly to suicide attempts.⁷⁶ This issue, labeled *umjolo yipandemic*, poses a major public health concern and can contribute to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.⁷⁷ Emotional failure induces distressing emotions like psychological trauma, betrayal, self-doubt, and humiliation, leading to a decline in resilience.⁷⁸ Love, while often depicted positively, can have adverse effects on mental well-being, especially when combined with infidelity and cultural influences.⁷⁹

Youth unemployment exacerbates feelings of frustration, despair, and diminished self-assurance.⁸⁰ Studies indicate a direct link between unemployment and suicidal behavior, with unemployed individuals being at a significantly higher risk.⁸¹ The death of a breadwinner also presents challenges, forcing individuals to adapt to new circumstances and often leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and agoraphobia, which are linked to suicidal attempts.⁸²

Gender-based violence further compounds the issue, with victims experiencing mental suffocation, depression, and a heightened risk of suicide, especially in cases of chronic abuse.⁸³ South Africa's high prevalence of HIV among women, gender-based violence, and alcohol consumption further exacerbate the situation. In summary, the study reveals that unemployment, financial difficulties, gender-based violence, emotional failure, and the death of a breadwinner are significant contributors to suicidal attempts among South African youth. These challenges induce stressors such as depression, anxiety, loss of confidence, and metathesiophobia, highlighting the urgent need for intervention and support for those facing these hardships.

When evaluating the emergence of mental health issues, it is evident that the government bears the responsibility for enhancing the mental well-being of all individuals; however, it relies on the Western knowledge framework for insights in addressing their respective societal issues.⁸⁴ Western epistemology posits the dominance of collective societal values, knowledge, and culture.⁸⁵ It is essential to note that

⁷¹ Adeyinka A Alabi, "Suicide Attempts among Students of Higher Education, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, South Africa," *South African Family Practice* 64, no. 4 (2022).

⁷² Alabi, "Suicide Attempts among Students of Higher Education, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, South Africa."

⁷³ Sharna Mathieu et al., "The Role of Unemployment, Financial Hardship, and Economic Recession on Suicidal Behaviors and Interventions to Mitigate Their Impact: A Review," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022): 907052.

⁷⁴ B. Harmer et al., *Suicidal Ideation* (Treasure Island: StatPearls Publishing, 2024).

⁷⁵ Bethany Ao, "Youths Living in Poverty Are More Likely to Die by Suicide, Study Suggests," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.inquirer.com/health/suicide-teen-poverty-philadelphia-guns-20191024.html>.

⁷⁶ Ritter, Hilliard, and Knox, "'Lovesick': Mental Health and Romantic Relationships among College Students."

⁷⁷ Said Aboud et al., "High Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted and Reproductive Tract Infections (STI/RTIs) among Patients Attending STI/Outpatient Department Clinics in Tanzania," *Tropical Medicine and Infectious Disease* 8, no. 1 (2023): 62.

⁷⁸ Ritter, Hilliard, and Knox, "'Lovesick': Mental Health and Romantic Relationships among College Students."

⁷⁹ A. Rokach and S. Chan, Love and Infidelity: Causes and Consequences, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 20(5). 2023). doi: 10.3390/ijerph20053904.

⁸⁰ Dipali Patel and Ireen Choga, *Determinants Of Youth Unemployment In South Africa*, 2018.

⁸¹ Sanna Huikari and Marko Korhonen, "Unemployment, Global Economic Crises and Suicides: Evidence from 21 OECD Countries," *Applied Economics* 53, no. 13 (2021): 1540–50.

⁸² J. Fitzgerald et al., "Understanding Families and Suicide Risk," The Psychology Center, Hamilton, 2013,

<https://www.slideshare.net/suicidepreventionnz/understanding-families-and-suicide-risk-implications-for-suicide-prevention-practice>.

⁸³ Jill Messing and Jacquelyn Campbell, "Suicide and the Danger Assessment: Links Between Suicide, Intimate Partner Violence, and Homicide.," *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2019).

⁸⁴ T. Singh, T. Poterba, D. Curtis, and H. Akil, Rare coding variants in ten genes confer substantial risk for schizophrenia. 604(7606), (2022). doi:10.1038/s41586-022-04556-w

⁸⁵ M. Frehiwot, D. Atobrah, and I. Addo, "Negotiating Spaces Exercising Agency and Managing Multiple Roles." *Research Gate*, 3(1), (2022). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360686967_Frehiwot_Et_al-_Volume-3-Issue-1_Negotiating-Spaces-Exercising-Agency-and-Managing-Multiple-Roles

through the adoption of Western doctrines unpurified, a significant number of African nations grapple with various socio-economic difficulties that constitute social injustices and have profound psychological impacts.⁸⁶ African nations like South Africa implement a singular framework that integrates capitalism and neo-liberalism to govern the affairs of the country.⁸⁷ Therefore, in most African nations, the occurrence of such psychiatric disorders among individuals caused by neo-liberal poor governance has led to a coup d'état.⁸⁸

The July unrest in South Africa can be viewed as a manifestation of both psychological disorders and opportunistic populist inclinations.⁸⁹ Notably, nationalism adheres to a similar ethical framework as capitalism which suffocates people.⁹⁰ Furthermore, it can be argued that nationalism is fundamentally intertwined with capitalism, which in turn is deeply rooted in neo-liberal ideology. This Western-imposed system manifests African problems in the society.⁹¹

Limitations

The investigation is one of the rarest of its kind within the nation's context, hindered by a limited sample size due to inherent complexities and challenges surrounding the interviewing process. Compounded by constrained funding, the researcher personally covered the expenses, reflecting the study's qualitative nature, which requires appropriate analytical tools that both the researcher and the university lacked.

To uphold the credibility of the data, diligent efforts were made to ensure diverse perspectives and participant concerns were represented. Explicit delineation of the study's limitations, analysis methodologies, participant selection process, data collection procedures, and comprehensive descriptions aim to facilitate transferability, enabling other scholars to conduct further research in this field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The South African government must prioritise addressing the detrimental consequences of poor governance by relooking:

- high cost of living;
- widespread unemployment;
- pervasive gender-based violence, among other pressing issues.

Implementing The White Paper for Social Welfare is crucial as it provides guidelines for:

- improving quality of life;
- protecting families;
- highlighting the importance of social workers.

Failure to address these challenges can lead to adverse effects such as:

- extreme hopelessness;
- suicidal ideation;
- involvement in unlawful activities, as emphasised by the United Nations Convention.

In the current era marked by widespread distress stemming from mental illnesses, the presence of social workers becomes increasingly crucial to effectively tackle these concerns. However, unemployment among social workers has far-reaching consequences beyond just the unemployed individuals themselves. It affects service users who cannot access necessary resources due to a lack of human resources and places an additional burden on employed social workers who must handle double the workload, leading to burnout and fatigue.

⁸⁶ J. Shah, "Revitalizing the role of social determinants in mental health." *World Psychiatry*, 23(1), (2024). doi:10.1002/wps.21163

⁸⁷ K. Gatwiri, J. Amboko and D. Okolla, "The implications of Neoliberalism on African economies, health outcomes and wellbeing: a conceptual argument." *Social Theory Health*, 18(1) (2020). doi:10.1057/s41285-019-00111-2

⁸⁸ T. Greene, J. Harju-Seppänen, M. Adeniji, C. Steel, N. Grey, N. and C. Brewin, . . . J. Billings, "Predictors and rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety in UK frontline health and social care workers during COVID-19." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), (2021). doi:10.1080/20008198.2021.1882781

⁸⁹ K. Linux, "A simple and effective way to study the level of cyber security and penetration testing of power electronic devices." *International Journal on Information Technologies and Security*, 16(2) (2023). doi:https://ijits-bg.com/index.php/2024.v16.i2.10

⁹⁰ L. Lushaba, and Z. Lategan, "Critique of Black Reason." *South African Historical Journal*, 70(3), (2018). doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2018.1495755

⁹¹ Lushaba and Lategan, "Critique of Black Reason."

In provinces like the Eastern Cape, where economic disadvantages are prevalent, issues such as substantial funds allocated for food parcels remaining unutilized highlight the urgent need for a review of the social work curriculum. There is a pressing necessity to incorporate comprehensive mental health studies into the curriculum to address the specific requirements of the South African context authentically and culturally appropriately.

Furthermore, the Department of Social Development should include voter education and promotion for young individuals in its program of action to encourage their active involvement in the democratic process. Social workers, as professionals in social activism, have the inherent ability and responsibility to advocate for social justice and effect positive change within society.

African leaders should exercise caution and avoid adopting European doctrines, such as neo-liberalism, when formulating policies, enacting legislation, and shaping societal ideologies, particularly in relation to service provision and strategies for addressing mental health challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that they do not accommodate Africans creating avoidable agonies.

It is apparent that the crux of the matter lies in the presumption of Western epistemology as a universally applicable standard that can seamlessly be transposed onto any given society without considering the unique contextual factors at play, thereby presenting significant obstacles for African nations due to their distinct circumstances compared to those of European countries. Consequently, by drawing upon their indigenous theories and ideologies instead of passively accepting Western epistemology as the default benchmark, Africans stand to effectively navigate through a multitude of governance-related dilemmas. The predominant sources of these dilemmas often originate from government officials who subscribe to a neo-liberal worldview

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that individuals face significant psychological and social challenges, leading to drastic measures of self-inflicted harm. It also highlighted the repercussions of these obstacles on South African youth, using East London as a microcosm of the broader issue. The researcher identified reasons behind individuals' inclination towards suicide, including the state's failure to fully implement the White Paper for Social Welfare of August 1997, which aimed to prevent such tragedies. The study underscores the urgent need for improved accessibility to mental health services, prompt investigation of shortcomings in healthcare services, prioritisation of youth by the government, and self-prioritisation of well-being by young individuals themselves.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Mavimbela Awam is one of the youngest intellectuals to emerge as a Clinical Social Worker from Walter Sisulu University. He has engaged in advancing Clinical Social Welfare in Eastern Cape through both practical and academic avenues. Consequently, in this huge unemployment situation in South Africa, he has been headhunted to participate in a multi-disciplinary team in implementing palliative care at various hospitals in the O.R. Tambo Region. He is currently involved in the decolonisation of Palliative Care Social Work training for better quality of life. At a young age, he has significantly impacted both practice

and academia in advocating for marginalised communities in health care. Mr. Mavimbela is frequently recognised by peers as an exceptional individual within his cohort.