





Intrapersonal Experiences and Suicide Ideation of University Students: The Case of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

There have been rising global reported cases of suicidal behaviors in schools and universities. In this qualitative study, the authors sought to explore how self-directed thoughts and emotions of intrapersonal experience that come from school performance precipitate suicide ideation among university students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to solicit self-reported information on self-directed thoughts and emotions of intrapersonal experience among 40 students from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi-Ghana. Two counselors from the Guidance and Counseling unit of the same institution were also interviewed. Theoretically, the paper employed Weiner's motivational theory. This study used a six-phase thematic analysis. The study noted that intrapersonal experiences of self-directed thoughts, particularly unachieved expectancy of success and self-directed emotions of pride, guilt, and shame emanated from poor academic performance. From the data, the authors discovered that prayer, institutional support, for instance, the Guidance and Counseling Unit of KNUST and off-campus extracurricular activities mediated in curtailing or reducing the burden of suicide ideation with the eventual act of suicide. In conclusion, this paper has established that intrapersonal experience is complementary to the interpersonal experience of university students in the study of suicide ideation to holistically comprehend the internal and external factors that generate suicide ideation. This study recommends that the judicial system of Ghana should rethink decriminalizing suicide and attempted suicide if students are to acknowledge their state of suicide ideation for the necessary intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

Suicidal behavior—suicide, suicide attempts, and ideation—has been identified as a leading cause of death and disability worldwide.¹ Despite the call of the World Health Organization's Gap Action

¹ David Klonsky, Alexis May, and Boaz Saffer. "Suicide, Suicide Attempt and Suicidal Ideation." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 12, (2016): 307-317.

Program in 2008 to include suicide ideation as a priority for global health, there is less work on populations such as university students. With the alarming increase in suicide among university students,² efforts have been made to determine the factors that influence suicide ideation.³ The World Health Organization [WHO] study reported that an estimated 800,000 suicide deaths occur globally every year and 79% of global suicides occur in low-and middle-income countries.⁴ Furthermore, the report stated that suicide was the second highest cause of death among people between the ages of 15 and 29 globally. A majority of university students fall within this age category. The WHO report reiterates global estimates are under-reported because of the sensitive nature of suicide.⁵ In most countries, suicide is considered illegal, misclassified as another cause of death, or pronounced as an accident. As a result, most people may be reluctant to report suicide cases. In Africa, under-reporting of suicide estimates is further complicated by cultural, religious, or legal sanctions,⁶ because the society frowns upon families with incidents of suicide cases. The studies further indicate that less is known about suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts across the African continent. There are no national surveys on suicide ideation, suicide attempts, or suicide. Data on suicide are often obtained from hospital records, which underestimate the number of cases as many individuals are only admitted to hospitals when in critical conditions. There is a lack of published studies on the prevalence of suicidal behaviors among university students to contextualize the issue⁷ in many African countries.

Similarly, in Ghana, despite frequent suicide reports provided by local media,⁸ there is a lack of comprehensive data on suicidal behaviors. In 2018, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Mental Health Authority (MEA) in Ghana revealed that in every single reported case of suicide there are four unreported cases. The CEO further stated that an average of 1,500 suicide cases are recorded annually. Based on this record, the number of estimated suicide cases annually in Ghana is 7,500. Under-reporting, lack of comprehensive studies, and other assessment inhibitions make the study on suicidal thought critical.

Several cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors that derive from interpersonal experiences have been identified to influence suicide ideation among students. Factors that include negative life events,⁹ hopelessness, and depressive symptoms, life stresses,¹⁰ social isolation, deficient coping strategies and demographic correlates¹¹ have all been identified to precipitate suicidal behaviors.¹² Other scholars concluded in their studies among university students that the propensity for

² Lynne Lamberg “Experts Work to Prevent College Suicides.” *JAMA*, 296, (2006): 502–504.

³ Klonsky, May and Saffer, “Suicide, Suicide Attempt and Suicidal Ideation.”

⁴ World Health Organization [WHO]. Suicide Prevention (2019) https://www.who.int/health-topics/suicide#tab=tab_2.

⁵ World Health Organization [WHO]. Depression: A Global Crisis (2012).

⁶ Becky S. Mars et al. “Suicidal Behavior across the African Continent: A Review of the Literature” *BMC Public Health*, 14, (2014): 606-610.

⁷ Emmanuel Nii Boye Quarshie et al. “Prevalence of suicidal behavior among nursing and midwifery college students” *Nursing Open*, 6, (2019): 897-906.

⁸ Daily Graphic JHS student commits suicide at Akyem Osiem.(2017).<http://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/>

⁹ Nancy Brenner, Sohela Hassan, and Lisa Barrios, “Suicidal ideation among college students in the United States.” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67, (1999): 1004–1008. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.67.6.1004

¹⁰ Peter M. Gutierrez, Paul J. Rodriguez, and Patricia Garcia, “Suicide risk factors for young adults: Testing a model across ethnicities.” *Death Studies*, 25(4), (2001): 319-340.

¹¹ Ricardo Orozco et al. “Association between attempted suicide and academic performance indicators among middle and high school students in Mexico: Results from a National Survey.” *Child Adolescent Psychiatry Mental Health*, 12(9), (2018): 934-945.

¹² Ian P. Collins, and Eugene S. Paykel. “Suicide amongst Cambridge University students 1970–1996” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 35(3) (2000):128-32.

hopelessness to result in suicide ideation was higher than depression.¹³ Studies elucidated further that suicide ideation was positively correlated with a mood disorder.¹⁴ Another study also concluded on University students that those who inflict self-injury are less likely to seek assistance and they are normally faced with anxiety disorders.¹⁵ However, these interpersonal variables have been found to have small, short-term effects on suicide ideation; a situation that warrants further investigations.¹⁶ Yet, the extent to which intrapersonal variables, including self-directed thoughts, particularly unachieved expectancy of success and self-directed emotions of low self-esteem, guilt, and shame that are associated with suicide ideation,¹⁷ have not been fully explored. This paper seeks to unravel the intrapersonal experiences that influence the thought of suicide among university students with the case of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana.

Moreover, extensive studies on the association between school performance and suicide ideation¹⁸ have established weak links between risk factors of poor school performance and suicide ideation.¹⁹ In assessing the association between school grades and suicide ideation among graduating cohorts in Sweden, for example, the study argued that the association between poor school performance and suicide ideation is weakened unless the moderating effect of predictors is captured. The study captured parental education as the moderating predictor for suicide ideation. Similarly, it was argued that unless mental health is captured, the association between poor school performance and suicide ideation may be weakened.²⁰ Additionally, despite the call for investigating moderating variables in the determination of the association between poor school performance and suicide ideation, there are still limited studies on the inclusion of moderating intrapersonal variables in the examination of suicide ideation and school performance. The rapid increase in suicide behaviors indicates the lacuna in suicide research on how university students fall into suicide ideation and this research contributes to the understanding of the phenomena.

The difficulty of obtaining suicidal behavioral records is further complicated by the extent to which the different kinds of suicide behaviors have been lumped together. Ideation, attempts, and actions have all been lumped into suicide studies. The inclusion of ideation in suicidal behavioral discussions is a complex issue²¹ because of the general lack of consistency in the transition from suicide ideation to suicide. But, the ideation-to-action framework continues to present issues that are yet to be answered. However, suicide ideation has gained prominence in discussions on suicidal behaviors because ideation serves as one of the main precursors to more serious behaviors of suicide.²²

¹³ Thomas Joiner et al. "Can positive emotion influence problem-solving attitudes among suicidal adults?" *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 32(5), (2001): 507-512.

¹⁴ Aaron T. Beck et al. Suicide ideation at its worst point: A predictor of eventual suicide in psychiatric outpatient *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*, 29(1) (1999): 1-9.

¹⁵ Sarah E. Gollust, Daniel Eisenberg, and Ezra Golberstein "Prevalence and correlates of self-injury among university students" *Journal of American College Health*, 56(5), (2008):491.

¹⁶ N. Hallensleben et al., Predicting suicidal ideation by interpersonal variables, hopelessness and depression in real-time. An ecological momentary assessment study in psychiatric inpatients with depression." *European Psychiatry*, 56, (2019): 43-50.

¹⁷ Bernard Weiner "Intra personal and interpersonal theories of Motivation from attributional perspective." *Educational Psychology Review*, 12(1), (2000): 12.

¹⁸ Susan C. De Luca et al., The Relationship between suicide ideation, behavioral health, and college academic performance. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 52(5), (2016): 534-540.

¹⁹ Charlotte Bjorkenstam et al. "School grades, parental education and suicide: A national register-based cohort study" *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Development*, 65(11), (2011): 993-998.

²⁰ Orozco et al. Association between attempted suicide and academic performance indicators, 937.

²¹ Klonsky, May and Saffer, "Suicide, Suicide Attempt and Suicidal Ideation," 310.

²² Orozco et al. "Association between attempted suicide and academic performance indicators, 934-945.

Since it has not been established in detail the factors that determine the individual's transition from suicidal thoughts to suicidal actions, the recognition of the presence of major behavioral factors of suicide ideation would facilitate monitoring its course over time to prevent suicide.²³

This exploratory study contributes to the literature on suicide ideation among university students. First, this study examines how intrapersonal experiences precipitate suicide ideation among university students. Secondly, the study investigates the moderating variables of intrapersonal experiences from school grades. The examination of the intrapersonal experience of university students and its moderating variables is necessary for understanding the association between poor school performance and the rapid increase in suicide ideation on university campuses.²⁴ A good background for the study is provided and proceeds with the theoretical underpinning, methods, discussions and conclusion.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study is informed by psychosocial perspectives of intrapersonal experience of motivational theory.²⁵ Weiner's motivational theory engages with two parts—intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. According to the theory, motivation concerns how an individual interprets events as well as how the events influence the individual's thinking and behavior. While intrapersonal motivation is individual-centered, interpersonal motivation is other-centered. The theory further explains intrapersonal experiences to include the self-directed thoughts and emotions of a person. This study applies an intrapersonal view from Weiner's motivational perspective to examine the association of university students' experiences with school performance and suicide ideation in order to provide an alternative dimension to the interpersonal dimension scholars are concerned with. The intrapersonal view on suicide ideation, as proposed in this study, examines intrapersonal experiences and emotional states prone to suicidal thoughts. Intrapersonal experience is conceptualized as the emotional feelings that are generated internally from self-imposed expectations of life. In this study, the authors operationalize intrapersonal experiences as the thoughts, emotions and behavior produced by an individual's own situation. The operationalized variables could be active or passive depending on the strength of the experience.

One of the most common ways by which suicide and suicide ideation have been assessed is by estimating the proportion of persons involved in the practice.²⁶ The number of persons with reported cases of suicide ideation can be counted at a low or high rate. The World Health Organization and other major organizations have all determined the prominence of suicide and suicide ideation based on the number of people who have intentions or have committed the act. Suicidal thoughts and suicide have also been assessed by examining their importance as a public health problem. These forms of assessments are based on interpersonal influences such as violence and conflicts. Classical work on social factors²⁷ influenced studies that showed that a lack of connection to others can intensify one's propensity for decreased academic success and might increase suicidal behaviors. Following Durkheim's views on suicide and external causality, many studies have examined the significance of social connectedness because of the important role these researchers placed in how external factors produced suicidal tendencies in people. Even situations such as emotional distress have all been viewed as emerging from a person's connection with other people. It is argued that the beliefs about the

²³ Hallensleben et al., "Predicting suicidal ideation by interpersonal variables, hopelessness and depression in real-time." 46.

²⁴ Bjorkenstam et al., "School grades, parental education and suicide: A national register-based cohort study," 993-998.

²⁵ Weiner "Intra personal and interpersonal theories of Motivation from attributional perspective." 12.

²⁶ WHO Preventing suicide: A global imperative (2014)

²⁷ Emile Durkheim *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. (Glencoe IL: Fress Press, 1951), 297.

responsibility of others and other-directed effects of anger, guilt, shame, and sympathy play a major role in suicide ideation and suicide.

However, among university students, suicide ideation and suicide may be largely derived from intrapersonal influences of self-directed thoughts, particularly unachieved expectancy of success and self-directed emotions of pride, guilt, and shame.²⁸ The study further argued that subjective expectancy of future success and self-directed emotions related to self-esteem, guilt, shame, and others are likely moderators of a student's actions after the student receives a poor grade in an exam. Weiner labeled self-directed thoughts and feelings as intrapersonal. Weiner derived intrapersonal motivation from an attribution perspective and postulated that unexpected events such as failure in an important exam will surely evoke attribution processes. In one form of Weiner's attribution process, an individual may assume that personality accounts for the individual's behavior. Stemming from Weiner's view, therefore, students would attribute failure in an examination to the self. Self-blame is further reinforced by factors such as social norms. According to Weiner, in certain situations, failure is attributed to multiple causes. An individual may derogate his/her personal ability, while another person may attribute failure to less hard work. However, both situations would create in the individual a sense of self-blame.

Weiner's purported views have been supported and expanded by other studies. It was noted that, for example, intrapersonal theory shows self-directed thoughts such as the expectancy of success as closely associated with self-directed emotions such as pride; while self-directed thoughts of failure are closely associated with emotions of guilt and shame.²⁹ This means that, for example, when a student fails an exam, he/she is likely to experience shameful or guilty self-emotions. The guilt or shame may be interpreted as the result of having studied less for the paper or as the result of the perceived lack of personal capacity. Students would react to failure with poor school performance and to success with good school performance. Although academic performance is perceived as a subjective indicator, it is argued that academic performance is consistently associated with suicidal ideation than such objective indicators as age inconsistency with grade level.³⁰

METHODOLOGY

The three main variables of interest in this qualitative study—intrapersonal experiences, academic performance, and suicide ideation—operate within both private and personal spheres. Hence, statistical data are normally difficult to obtain. This qualitative research used a case study design. A case study allowed for an in-depth examination of suicide ideation in the context³¹ of a university setting. Unfortunately, only cross-sectional data with meta-analysis have been used in suicide behavior studies.³² A case study is suitable for getting in-depth data on personal and private discussions that would ensue from the interviews. A case study was suitably used to examine the intrapersonal experiences, academic performance, and suicide ideation of students at KNUST. This study used a semi-structured interview guide to gather information from 40 purposively selected students who responded to the invitation placed on classroom notice boards, Google forms, and classroom

²⁸ Weiner, "Intrapersonal and interpersonal theories of Motivation from attributional perspective," 12.

²⁹ Klonsky, May and Saffer, "Suicide, Suicide Attempt and Suicidal Ideation," 310.

³⁰ Orozco et al. "Association between attempted suicide and academic performance indicators," 939.

³¹ Haradhan Mohajan "Qualitative research methodology in social sciences and related subjects" *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 7(1), (2018): 23-48.

³² Dan J. Stein et al., "Cross-national analysis of the association between traumatic events and suicidal behavior: Findings from the WHO World Mental Health Surveys." *PLoS One*, 5(5), (2010): 10574.

announcements. The interviews were conducted at the residential halls on the KNUST campus, targeting one female-only residential hall, two mixed halls (halls that accommodate both male and female students) and one male-only residential hall. Respondents were recruited from all six colleges of the University. Respondents were undergraduate students pursuing various academic degree programs. Two counselors of the Guidance and Counseling Unit of the university were also interviewed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Respondents provided self-reported information on their intrapersonal experiences, suicide ideation, and academic performance.³³ Beyond the standard methodological problems associated with interviewing, there are potential confounding factors that can affect self-report rates of suicidal ideation.³⁴ The report explained that self-reported rates of suicidal ideation are particularly problematic because suicidal ideation is often a fleeting, fluctuating experience that is not observable. Moreover, self-reported lifetime rates of suicidal ideation are also confounded by recall biases in remembering long-distant events. The WHO Report further stated the main biases of self-reports to include the literacy level of the population, specific wording used in the interviewing, length of the interview and interpretation of the exact meaning and implications of the wording in the local language. Other factors mentioned in the report include the time frame considered for the interview and the extent to which respondents are willing to reveal personal and private information. To limit some of the influence of the factors given in the report, this study considered the following measures—respondents selected for this study were university students, the time used for each interview was between 30 minutes and 45 minutes, and respondents agreed to provide revealing information about suicidal thoughts and academic performance when assured of confidentiality.

Respondents in this study read and signed consent forms which duly stated the overall purpose, as well as risks and rewards/benefits of the study. Informed consent forms stated that the study was voluntary and respondents could withdraw if they felt uncomfortable.³⁵ This study ensured the confidentiality of the respondents and used codes to replace the identity of respondents to ensure anonymity. The KNUST Institutional Review Board of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences issued ethical clearance for this study.

School performance in this study was measured by students' satisfaction with their academic outcomes. Some of the indicators of academic outcomes selected for his study were the ability of students to adjust to university guidelines, choose academic programs they liked, select preferred courses for a major graduating program and the ability to obtain Course Weighted Average (CWA) or Grade Point Average (GPA) that warrants the award of a degree.³⁶ The ability of students to adjust to the university's guidelines and rules also helps to produce proper academic functioning.

This study established trustworthiness in the four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.³⁷ To promote credibility in the study, various processes of triangulation were used to get information. To determine which participants to include in this study³⁸

³³ Bregje A. Van Spijker "Reducing suicidal ideation: cost-effectiveness analysis of a randomized controlled trial of unguided web-based self-help." *Journal of medical Internet Research*, 14(5), (2012): 141.

³⁴ WHO Preventing suicide: A global imperative (2014).

³⁵ Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (USA: AltaMira Press, 2011).

³⁶ C. B. Williams, M. Galanter, H. Dermatis and V. Schwartz, "The Importance of Hopelessness among University Students Seeking Psychiatric Counselling" *Psychiatric Quarterly* 73(4), (2008): 311-319.

³⁷ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*. (Thousand Oaks; Ca: SAGE, 1985).

³⁸ Micheal Bloor, *Techniques of Validation in Qualitative Research: A Critical Commentary, Context and Method in Qualitative Research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

purposive sampling was employed.³⁹ Bernard argued that purposive sampling, like other non-probability methods, enables the researcher to identify and describe shared experiences, opportunities and the challenges of life.⁴⁰ Participants were selected based on their interest to respond to the questions and motivation to be a part of the study. To ensure transferability, the researcher relied on thick descriptions of life's situations of KNUST students. These descriptions⁴¹ provided a rich enough portrayal of campus life. This study was conducted in 2020. Dependability for this study involved peer debriefing. Colleague field researchers of KNUST were used to read and react to field notes and to provide interpretations and feedback.

This study used six phases of thematic analysis⁴² that served as an outline for qualitative analysis guidelines.⁴³ According to Braun and Clarke, the first phase of the analysis involves familiarizing yourself with the data. To become familiar with the data for this study, the authors listened to audio-recorded interviews, reviewed extensive notes and reflected on daily observations on campus. As a way of obtaining validity of the work, transcripts were thoroughly read through to ensure that clear errors were avoided and there was a constant comparison of data.⁴⁴ Carefully, the researchers read and re-read all the transcriptions to understand what the participants were saying and how they were saying what they said while making notes and jotting down early impressions. The next phase involved organizing the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Manually, initial codes were generated for the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences revealed through reading each transcript. The third phase involved searching for themes. The codes were reviewed and combined into themes.⁴⁵ All the codes that fitted together were put into a theme. These themes were descriptive, describing patterns in the data that applied to the research questions. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed, modified and developed into broader ones. For the fifth phase, the authors refined the themes to identify the essence of what each theme was about, what each theme was saying, the sub-themes involved, and how the themes related to the main theme. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing a report. The themes were put into a write-up.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main areas of interest in the investigation—intrapersonal experiences, school performance and suicide ideation—permeated this section of the study. The thematic areas discussed included the following: academic performance and suicidal thoughts; student's academic performance; and students' coping mechanisms for stress.

Academic performance and suicidal thoughts

From the study, only three of the 40 respondents (7.5%) interviewed mentioned they had suicidal thoughts. However, when respondents were asked to state how they felt when they were unsuccessful or trailed (failed) an exam, their responses provided a good premise for understanding the role of moderating variables associated with poor school performance and suicide ideation.⁴⁶

³⁹ Norman K. Denzin, *Sociological Method: A Sourcebook*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978).

⁴⁰ Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*.

⁴¹ Norman Stahl and James King, "Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research." *Journal of Development Education* 44(1), (2020): 26-28.

⁴² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, (2006): 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

⁴³ Moira Maguire and Brid Delahunt, "Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars." *Journal of Higher Education* 8 (3), (2017): 3351-33514.

⁴⁴ John W. Creswell, *Controversies in Mixed Methods Research*. In Denzin N. K and Lincoln, Y. (Eds). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.) (Thousand Oaks, Ca: SAGE. 2011), 360-284.

⁴⁵ Gretchen B. Rossman and Sharon F. Rallis, *Learning in the field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.) (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage, 2003):78-79.

⁴⁶ To trail, be in debt or fail an examination are terms used interchangeably by students in KNUST.

When respondents were asked to explain how they felt when they had poor academic performance, one respondent in the third year shared his experience:

My life came 'crumbling' when I found out that I had trailed (failed) in two of my courses. Life became more difficult for me when one of my friends who was struggling in the same course informed me that he had passed the subject. In fact, I had helped this guy pass while I trailed. You won't understand how I felt the first night when I heard the news from my friend. I had suicidal thoughts run through my whole mind because I blamed myself for not passing all my papers. But, I just didn't know how to commit suicide. I was determined to find out more about suicide. Something happened so I stopped. You see, the laws of Ghana criminalize suicide and I don't want to spend my life in jail.

In reiteration, another respondent, about 20 years old in the final year of her program who had planned suicide remarked:

I can't think of suicide but I recognize that when I trailed in one of my subjects last year, I was so 'disturbed.' At one time I felt like 'doing something,' but I didn't know what to do.

A third respondent, a female student of 23 years, who was quick to overcome suicidal thoughts because she was busy with her academic work, stated:

The situation that contributed to this bad idea is that, I looked at my situation from various angles and perspectives and I got to know that I will become the 'shamed' person on campus. I thought suicide will be the nicest way to escape this problem of trials and shame. But I quickly put the thought out of my mind and moved on.

Although students rarely admit the link between poor academic performances with suicide ideation, the feelings that emerge out of the poor performance precipitate suicidal thoughts. Respondents in this study indicated that they felt disturbed, ashamed or bad and perceived suicide to be the 'nicest way to escape this problem of trials.'

Another respondent wanted to 'do something.' When the respondent was asked to explain what 'doing something' in his story meant, he explained that 'doing something' was a feeling he got when he realized he had trailed the exam but the feeling fizzled out eventually. Although the respondent denied that 'doing something' had any association with suicide ideation, further explanation from the discussion indicated otherwise. Out of his feelings (although he could not appropriately describe the feeling), one can see an emergence of suicidal thoughts for escape. As shown in the responses, the student did not place any importance on the thought of 'doing something' and further argued that ideas that come from low academic grades, incomplete grades in subjects, or debts cannot lead to suicide ideation.

Another respondent explained this reaction: 'I quickly pushed the thought out of my mind and moved on.' This statement reiterates the notion that the small, short-term effects of variables that account for suicide ideation may be active or passive.⁴⁷ The impact of the active variable is stronger than the passive variable. The mere wish of death may be passive but a person who felt disturbed, who

⁴⁷ Jasper Wiebenga et al. "Suicide ideation versus suicide attempt: Examining overlapping and different determinants in a large cohort of patients with depression and/or anxiety." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 55(2), (2021): 178.

perceived his/her life as crumbled, or who wanted to do something, as narrated in this study, falls under the active category.

It is worth noting that the perception of the students is that suicide ideation is usually shown through suicide attempts. From the study, the most common suicide strategy revealed is an overdose of prescription drugs. The three respondents who agreed that they had suicidal thoughts indicated they had attempted suicide as well. All three respondents posited that they had overdosed on prescription medicines.

One of the three respondents who was hospitalized as a result of overdose explained the attempt he made at committing suicide when he remarked:

When I trailed in six of my courses in the same academic year, I carefully thought about suicide. In an attempt, I overdosed on my prescription drugs. I swallowed six of my pills instead of two. I had run out of my medicines and needed to restock. Unfortunately, I reacted to the overdose. I had shortness of breath and tossed on my bed so my roommate rushed me to the hospital. Now I know my roommate saved my life.

The other two attempts made at suicide in the study were overdosing on pain relievers. Rather than using the medicines prescribed for their intended purpose, one of the respondents overdosed and explained her action: 'It was to relieve me of the pain I was having from the trails because I had more pains from trails.'

Students' Academic Satisfaction

The ability of students to adjust to campus life through the selection of preferred major courses, enrolment into preferred academic programs and attainment of good CWA or GPA scores were the factors considered for academic satisfaction in this study. Many of the respondents mentioned that the programs they were studying were not their first choice for a bachelor's degree. The admission process of universities in Ghana, including KNUST, allows students to select more than one choice for a program of study. Once a student does not get into the first choice program, the university automatically places the student into the second or third choice program. Sometimes a student is given a course s/he did not select. Other factors that determine the choice of programs offered to students include the admission rate, students' performance in the West Africa Senior High School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), and occasionally affirmative action.⁴⁸ Respondents enrolled into their first, second or third choice programs identified their strengths and weaknesses in the courses offered and commented on how they had to work harder to succeed in the courses when given a second or third choice offer.

A first-year student who faced difficulties in some of the courses the school offered him argued that:

If we could run away from the course, I would do so. I don't have any interest in the subjects I'm taking. But I don't want to waste my time leaving the program, reapplying and thinking about readmission into another program. You know, I also have to write WASSCE to improve my grades.

Consequently, most respondents in this study indicated they failed their exams because of the course offered. These students made little effort to pass their exams and felt guilty, ashamed, or angry when they trailed. Most of them felt that if they had studied hard, they would have performed better. One respondent regretted her actions and remarked:

⁴⁸ KNUST Admissions Course Selection <https://apps.knust.edu.gh/admissions/> (2018).

I regret not putting in much effort when it came to math-related courses especially, research methods in 3rd year. I put into my mind that I don't like math and so I wasn't good at it. I wouldn't practice the statistical foundations of the course and I regretted that because in the end I had to chew (memorize) my notes and failed the exam.

Another respondent expressed unambiguous support for the less effort students put into studies and the feelings they derive and remarked:

My 'tragic moment' and the worse feeling was not studying hard enough to pass all my papers.

Another respondent who shared her experience in a similar situation stated:

Oh! It was bad like we all know, a trail makes you feel bad. Technically trail means you didn't learn or you didn't take learning seriously. So it affected me emotionally and socially. I felt really, really down because I thought my dad would get disappointed and my friends who believed in me would also get disappointed. I felt very, very down. I felt really, really down and it even led to thinking something really, really bad.

Unfortunately, once the university admitted a student and offered a course to that student there is limited option for change. Students who wished to change courses reapplied in the next year or transferred to another university the following year. This study revealed that some students had as many as six trails in a semester. Students showed their frustration in trailing in subjects.

However, the university offered the opportunity for students to rewrite trailed papers. At the end of each academic year, students wrote supplementary examinations for trailed subjects. This opportunity was welcoming support for students in this study.

According to a second-year student who was asked to give his opinion on the opportunity to rewrite the subjects he had trailed:

Supplementary examinations conducted at the end of an academic year encouraged me to rewrite my trailed examinations. Supplementary examinations reassured me of an opportunity to complete their program. I was required to re-write my trailed papers anytime during my four-year degree program and I knew I had to pass all the courses before I can receive an award for my bachelor's degree.

Although most of the students interviewed had debts, trailed, or failed in some of the subjects they offered, they indicated that they were satisfied with the opportunity KNUST offered to them to rewrite the exam. They envisaged this opportunity as a way for them to graduate and get a job. But, this opportunity, some students asserted, did not remove the 'burden of failure.' As one respondent puts it: 'I felt miserable when I realized that I had trailed my exam.'

Another student shared her worries about examination failure and remarked:

The future makes me worried. I am so afraid of entering into it (the future) looking at the state of our country now. It is not an economy that makes a person glad to make it into the future. But with the employable skills I gained, I can create my own job. I think about my worries all the time. Sometimes, I wish I could end it all.

Students' worries about examinations and failures were confirmed by the counsellors of the university who argued:

Generally, the number of students who use our unit increases during the period when examinations begin and decrease immediately after examinations.

Scholars also argue that students who cannot actualize the prospects of academic failure resort to suicide ideation and suicide.⁴⁹ Students in this study perceived the future as distant, but they pointed out that the job market in Ghana is ‘choked’ or has limited employment options. Students also argued that those who performed well academically were more likely to secure better jobs upon graduation.⁵⁰

Students Coping Mechanisms for Stress

This study also found respondents’ coping mechanisms in difficult situations. Some of the coping strategies were used for immediate relief of problems while other strategies were linked to the future. Respondents mentioned coping strategies including listening to music, playing video games, consulting with other persons, or sleeping. In addition, the KNUST Guidance and Counselling Unit provided institutional support for students. However, one other strategy that stood up in this study was students’ belief in prayers. Studies with students in midwifery in Ghana indicated that the belief in God and trust that God will see them through their difficult circumstances was expressed by many students irrespective of their religious background.⁵¹

A final-year student who showed her religious inclination towards every aspect of her daily activities remarked:

Never! Taking one’s life is a sin to God. Why would I think of killing myself when I didn’t give myself that life?

In reiteration, the two counsellors of the university interviewed in this study indicated:

Some students use the services of their pastors in difficult times rather than the services of our unit.

To confirm the religious beliefs of students as a coping mechanism, another respondent argued:

Suicide ideation is only for people who do not believe in God. Once you believe in God, you know God will help you deal with the situation.

Another student gave an account of some of the religious practices of students when he explained:

I fasted from food for three days and prayed throughout the day when I failed one of my courses. This is how I cope with difficult situations including failing any of my courses. I am relieved after fasting and praying. In most cases, I overcame the difficulty. Even if I don’t get rid of the difficulty, I am ok after I fast and pray.

Although there have been limited studies on religion and suicide ideation, the experiences students shared in dealing with failure showed religion and belief in the supernatural played a key role. In explaining this assertion, this study argues that self-blame and self-directed thoughts may cause people to choose coping strategies that would lead to improvement of the self by a supernatural authority. In this way, an individual’s self-directed thoughts may interconnect with self-directed emotions and cause the individual to derive satisfaction from prayer. In this study, prayer served as a

⁴⁹ Heidi K. Hjelmeland et al. “Why people engage in Para suicide: A cross-cultural study of intentions.” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 32(4), (2002): 380-393.

⁵⁰ Richard L. Dukes and Barbara D. Lorch, “The effects of school, family, self-concept, and deviant behavior on adolescent suicide” *Journal of Adolescence*, 12(3), (1989): 239-251.

⁵¹ Quarshie et al. “Prevalence of suicidal behavior among nursing and midwifery college students in Ghana,” 901.

successful coping strategy and accounted for the tendency for denial of suicide ideation among students. Using prayer as a coping strategy is increasing in developing countries.⁵² Although Wachholtz and Sambamthoori's study found older women to be more likely to use prayer to answer lifestyle behavior, this study found that young adults in university also used prayer as a key coping mechanism in dealing with suicide ideation. Students fasted from food, visited prayer camps, consulted with prophets of God and sought divine interventions for their problems. This routine of seeking divine support was not only practiced when students trailed but also before they wrote an exam.

In sharing the role of prayer in students' examination, one respondent stated that:

Anytime I had an exam to write, I spent three days fasting at a prayer camp during the weekend preceding the exam. My prophet gives me 'directions' to follow to achieve success in the exam. Don't get me wrong, I learn for the exam, but at the same time, I have to follow the 'directions' of my prophet. I cannot be successful without my prophet's 'direction.'

According to the above respondent, the "directions" or rituals from prophets include fasting, participating in evangelism, and abstaining from contact with close friends who may distract him from the "directions." These regular "directions" usually intensify when respondents get poor grades. Another study by Gregg found that the use of religiosity/spirituality increases during a crisis. Women used denial and/or anger as an effective strategic response to the initial reaction to stress. These responses emphasize women's resilience to treatment. But when the women's situations become worse, they turn to God through prayer for answers to their problems. Most of the women in the study found comfort in God.⁵³

In addition to resorting to prayer in difficult times, students in this study also believed in hard work. One of the students expressed her feeling about engaging in practical activities that would enhance her employable opportunities when she stated:

We have had a lot of joys especially, when we went to do attachment in large companies such as Tema Oil Refinery and realized the practicality of the course that we study in school in the industry. We are very, very, glad to get such opportunities. These job practices help build our confidence.

Another finding from the study showed that extra-curricular programs were important to KNUST students and encouraged them to get relief from trails. Despite the difficulties students experienced during their studies, they shared their good moments at internships, educational tours, field trips, and job fairs. Respondents indicated that extra-curricular programs have been helpful in providing students with more engaged on- and off-campus programs. Some of the extra-curricular programs the students mentioned are internships and sports. Most of the students mentioned the satisfaction and experience they gained in these extra-curricular activities. They gained hands-on experience as they interned with companies and supplemented classroom teaching with on-the-job training. From the study, KNUST student internship programs cut across all kinds of companies in Ghana. Although, the respondents interviewed did not directly link their future careers with suicide

⁵² Amy Wachholtz and Usha Sambamthoori, "National trends in prayer use as a coping mechanism for depression: Changes from 2002 to 2007." *Journal of Religion and Health*, 52(4), (2013): 1356-1368.

⁵³ Godfrey Gregg, "I am a Jesus Girl: Coping stories of Black American Women Diagnosed with Breast Cancer," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 50, (2010): 1040-1053.

ideation, they mentioned that their success in academic performance was important in the acquisition of better-paying jobs.

RECOMMENDATION

The present study posits that both interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences should be given equal attention because interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences are complementary rather than contradictory in suicide and suicide ideation studies. Students designed coping strategies by listening to music, playing games, taking up extra-curricular activities, internships and most importantly seeking religious support. Prayer and other forms of spiritual engagements also provide support and reduce the incidence of suicide ideation. The study also recommends institutional policies that would facilitate changes in academic program selection processes. It recommends a shift in the criminal discourses of suicide ideation and suicide to a more humane approach that promotes rehabilitation. This study serves as a guide to university authorities in Ghana with a pathway to adopt intervention strategies that reduce the risk of suicide ideation. Further studies may examine the level of intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences for academic outcomes among university students.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study sought to contribute to the literature on suicide ideation among university students. First, the authors examined how intrapersonal experiences precipitate suicide ideation among university students. Secondly, they investigated the moderating variables of intrapersonal experiences from school grades. The research findings showed that most of the students have apparently low awareness and knowledge of what signs indicate suicidal ideation. This has led to a widespread refusal by students in relating the thoughts that emerged from their emotional distress to suicide ideation. The authors conceptualized this ambivalent awareness of the thought of suicide in this article as explicit and implicit knowledge of suicide ideation. The field study also noted that the criminalization of suicide and attempted suicide in the judicial system of Ghana imposes fear on university students in acknowledging their state of suicide ideation. The few respondents who described their attempt at suicide spoke with a lot of caution and reluctance to avoid any criminal implications. The authors argued from the data that intrapersonal experiences of university students are fundamental in suicide ideation with the case of KNUST. The study further noted that intrapersonal experiences of self-directed thoughts, particularly unachieved expectancy of success and self-directed emotions of pride, guilt, and shame emanated from poor academic performance. Although academic performance is perceived as a subjective indicator, the study found that academic performance is consistently associated with suicide ideation than such objective indicators as age. The study that prayer, institutional support for instance the Counseling Unit of KNUST and off-campus extracurricular activities mediated in curtailing or reducing the burden of suicide ideation with the eventual act of suicide. In conclusion, this paper has established that intrapersonal experience is complementary to the interpersonal experience of university students in the study of suicide ideation so as to holistically comprehend the internal and external factors that generate suicide ideation.

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