

Qualitative Research Proposal Paper

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Abstract

As the stresses of modern-day living increase, the need for mental health services is prevalent. Despite the relief found in counseling services, the misconceptions and stigma attached still prevent many individuals from seeking treatment. In The Bahamas, there is a strong religious affiliation and exploring how religiosity interacts with mental health serves can inform clinical practitioners of ways to increase individuals desire to seek counseling services. It is the goal of this study to understand the perception of mental health from 2nd generation native Bahamian individuals who proclaim spirituality and attend church. Participants will be recruited through open announcements at different churches on Grand Bahama Island and upon completing a form and an initial interview, six participants will be selected. The research methodology proposed is a phenomenological approach.

Key words: phenomenological approach, mental health stigma, religiosity, counseling services

Introduction

The Bahamas is several decades behind most countries with regards to mental health, and services provided. With one small hospital and several community clinics, adequate counseling services are not provided. Grand Bahama is an island that has more churches than perhaps any other type of institution. While most claim to believe in God and share some respect for faith, individuals are struggling and counseling can meet such needs. The goal of this study is to learn more about the experience of individual's who proclaim spirituality and attend church, and their perception of Mental Health.

There is little research conducted on Grand Bahama Island, this study seeks to fill the gap in one of many needed areas. The proposal addresses the question: What are the perceptions and experiences of 2nd generation native Bahamians who attend church and proclaim spirituality with seeking counseling services? The high involvement of most native Grand Bahamian's and their church affiliations urges the author to consider: are there any tensions that exist in their perceptions of mental health? Findings of this study could inform practitioners and key stakeholders about necessary steps to provide the necessary support for mental health. This study seeks to describe an experience, and the proposed research methodology is phenomenology.

This topic is of interest to the author because as a native Bahamian who has developed a strong passion for Mental Health and its perception, there is a need for education about mental health and the normalization of this important aspect of well-being. This discovery could encourage more individuals to seek services.

Purpose of Study

This study seeks to learn and understand the experiences of individuals who proclaim spirituality and their perceptions toward seeking counseling services. This study is assuming that the stigma does exist on this island, and that there may be some distrust between spirituality and the mental health field. While we are operating on some presuppositions about what is understood regarding mental health perceptions; it is necessary to gather data and utilize findings to create positive changes toward the stigma.

It is the goal of this study that through understanding these individuals' experiences, the data can be used to promote mental health services or increase psychoeducation about mental health so that more individuals can reduce their suffering and receive much needed assistance.

Conceptual Framework

The stigma of Mental Health is globally recognized and research indicates that one in every three individuals struggle during their lifetime with mental illness (Vigo et. al, 2016). A study conducted in low-income and middle-income countries discovered that the stigma of mental health resulted in delayed treatment seeking, and reduced access to proper care (Afzal et. al, 2021). The connection between mental health and religiosity has increased over the last decade, with many low-income countries lacking in this research topic (Wang et al. 2019).

The goal of this proposed research study is to describe and understand the perception of individuals who claim spirituality towards Mental Health. Crucial sub-categories to consider include: what is the current climate for mental health, and how does this intersect with religiosity. The literature describes the stigma and the need for mental health services, along with the increased attention to religiosity and mental health. The personal framework from

which this topic originates is based on future aspirations of offering counseling services to the community and seeking to better understand the experiences of selected individuals.

Growing up on Grand Bahama Island, the only type of counseling that was available was vocational counseling in high school and this was rendered from the school's priest. Spiritually, the author's early years were largely influenced by the church as we attended several services each week. Amidst the wonderful experiences, there were many unanswered questions about God, religion, The Bible, and how did miracles really work? How does counseling fit in with God and religion? A perspective which integrates psychology and people's longing for relationship with God can be explained by object relations theory, where the counselor can be viewed as a transitional object to God (Gaultiere, 1990). In order for this desire to be fulfilled a person needs to have a relationship with a Good Enough Object who can serve as a transitional object to God as the Perfect Object (Gaultiere, 1990). Is it possible that individuals who experience empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard can begin to feel safe, take a risk of being vulnerable, and seek God more?

After a nine year stay in South Florida for tertiary education and greater exposure to Mental Health, the author developed new perspectives on the understanding of humanity and the benefits of counseling. These views have clearly shaped the author's thinking and steered the author in the direction of this topic. A study conducted in Israel sought to learn more about religiosity and barriers to mental healthcare. Religious clients conveyed their skepticism about the mental health care system and were concerned about the social stigma attached to treatment (Nakash et.al, 2019). Some studies show that religious beliefs hinder seeking treatment, due to the belief in a higher entity (Nakash et.al, 2019). This article seems to hold a strong similarity to what is intended in The Bahamas.

Despite its gained traction in the last few decades, there are many significant gaps in the role of religion in mental health. This study discovered that clients with religious beliefs viewed their problems as spiritual and not psychological; religious beliefs often provide contexts for suffering and a way to cope with the suffering with prayer as the antidote (Nakash et. al, 2019). Mainland China having 1.3 billion residents, 94% of whom have engaged in spiritual activities have reported that almost no research has been conducted on the topic of the effects of religious belief and practice on attitudes toward mental health (Wang et. al 2019).

Further research conducted among the Latino community discussed several paradigms. There were individuals who did not utilize mental health services if the causes of mental illness were associated with religiosity or supernatural events (Moreno et al, 2017). There were also individuals more inclined to seek counseling services if the origin of mental illness appeared biological or considered serious (Moreno et al, 2017).

These studies provide an idea of what has already been discovered and more importantly highlighted in at least three countries that this attitude of religious individuals toward mental health remains a significant gap. Here it is clearly seen that the study is necessary because more and more people may struggle with clarity, and tensions that arise from the needed reconciliation between these two concepts. Similar predictions are anticipated for this proposed study. This study helps to outline possibilities of what the findings could be. As this study was conducted in Israel, a nation that is known for religious adherence, Grand Bahama could have a similar response with the high priority placed on religiosity.

Researcher reflexivity

The topic of the perception of counseling services from adults within the church resonates with me strongly. In a lot of ways, I myself wrestle with the vernacular connotations of mental health. I grew up in a conservative brethren church, where solid doctrine was taught and the Bible held all of the answers to life's problems. 1 Peter 5:7 says to "...cast all of our cares on him, because he cares for you." This foundation led me in a lot of ways to the belief that you only go to God for help. I believe this and I struggle with reconciling that counseling also helps. I suppose in some ways what I am hoping to discover and explore in others is also present in myself. Counseling is not a separation from God but rather a safe space to help others navigate their struggles and obstacles.

This reflexivity section articulates my beliefs and genuine struggles with the mental health field and religiosity. I am aware of my biases and will actively need to suspend my own thoughts; bracketing. Further down in the trustworthiness section, I discuss how I plan to strengthen the findings. Findings could catapult the increase of utilizing mental health services, and contribute to the existing literature with new data from The Bahamas.

Research Question

The research question is: What are the perceptions and experiences of 2nd generation native Bahamians who attend church and proclaim spirituality with seeking counseling services? My experience tells me that most native Bahamians are skeptical of Mental Health and appear confused about what it is really is. There is a sense of going against God, if an individual seeks

out counseling services. What exactly is counseling and is it truly helpful? Misconceptions about what it truly is exist.

A major goal for this study is to gain an understanding of the perception of adult individuals who proclaim spirituality toward Mental Health and determine the viability for a private practice. Would individuals actually seek counseling services, are there barriers that could be addressed once they are known? Further research can be conducted on ways to improve the current level of knowledge about Mental Health and individuals who proclaim spirituality and are struggling with mental health can be helped. As religiosity is a major tenet for most natives, could this information help churches be more aware of mental health and examine the connection between faith and mental health?

Methods

Research Design

Although qualitative research seeks to understand an experience, phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of an experience without it being filtered or influenced in any way (Husserl, 2012). A phenomenological approach would be best suited for the topic because the goal is to understand the experience of individuals and for them to genuinely reflect on their perceptions without interference. Van Manen (2017) discusses that phenomenology can pursue insights into phenomenological meanings, but also there can be a strong interest in the outcomes and knowledge that will be gained. The knowledge gained can hopefully determine future plans for counseling services offered.

Research Relationships

Small communities tend to run into a common problem; everyone knows everyone. The author is inclined to think that the data would be more reliable if the individuals were unfamiliar. Familiarity could influence the data from participants, as participants may want to give the right or expected answers and serve as a threat to trustworthiness.

Setting and Participant Selection

In anticipation that participants may be initially cautious with involvement in a research study; participants will be allowed to choose the day and time. It will be recommended to conduct the interviews within the individual's home, unless there are obstacles that exist. Depending on the time of year that the study is conducted, most homes do not have air conditioners and the climate might affect the comfortable, relaxed atmosphere that is desired for optimal participation (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant selection will be conducted through open announcements at various churches on the island for those interested in sharing their views about mental health. Participants who are interested will complete a small form that includes questions regarding: 2nd generation native Bahamians, age, spirituality, average church attendance, availability and their overall interest in full participation. The participants who meet the criteria will be contacted and an initial interview will take place. This interview will include a detailed explanation of the research topic and its purpose, verbal and written permission to audiotape the interview, and an overall willingness will serve as a final criterion. No incentives will be given as to protect the authenticity of the entire experience and limit the influences. As time and resources are limited, the study will consist of six participants.

Data Collection

The proposed method to collect data will be semi-structured, in-depth face to face interviews, as this is highly recommended for phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994). Selected Participants will be contacted by telephone and asked to set up a day and time for interviews to begin. It is best for interviews to begin with a brief social conversation that encourages comfort and meditative breathing would be helpful in setting a relaxed atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). It is also recommended that the participant is invited to pay attention to the entire experience, perhaps noting particular moments of impact and then relay such information (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis:

Coding will be the method through which the data is analyzed. There must be much flexibility while coding so that an open posture is maintained. In-vivo codes will be used to symbolize anything of significance. Once the initial coding has been completed, then categories and sub-categories will be organized to make meaning of the data. This is where the idea of themes emerging as we see from the data, exactly what the data states. Memo writing is also really important as oftentimes insights enter the mind while involved in other activities. There can be integral revelations that add value to the research (Mcleod, 2011).

Trustworthiness

Given the personal nature of this study, it would likely be best to have a minimum of two researchers working alongside. For the findings to have utility the trustworthiness section has to be convincingly strong. There are four areas that are recommended to strengthen trustworthiness: Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Gunawan, 2015). Member – check in has been described as a most vital technique (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This

critical component to establishing credibility refers to the continuous check with members about the collected data throughout the study.

Transferability is best achieved through obtaining a thick description of every detail of the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). A thorough understanding of how the research was conducted including details such as: participant reactions, setting, climate, attitudes of both participants and investigators can inform other research projects and findings can then be applied in other studies. Rich data is a strong method to increase trustworthiness.

Confirmability employs a method called reflexivity. This allows for a primary researcher's biases to be revealed when working with a team. Gergen & Gergen (2000) describe that reflexivity is a way to allow the investigators to demonstrate their personal contributions to the research. Additionally, triangulation further aids the process of limiting biases and strengthen confirmability. Dependability is best addressed through a technique called inquiry audit. An auditor is a researcher who is not associated with the study to evaluate both the research process and the collected data (Amankwaa, 2016). The auditor should speak the same language as the researchers, and be able to provide constructive feedback in a timely manner. To ensure that the auditor genuinely strengthens the trustworthiness, it is necessary to create and maintain an audit trail documents.

These steps toward strengthening trustworthiness should eliminate the most common threat to this study on a small-island (researcher bias).

Conclusion

This research proposal seeks to understand the perception toward mental health from adults aged 21 years or older who proclaim spirituality and attend church. As a counselor and a

Christian, this topic is deeply meaningful as the author shares a strong passion to help people and specifically provide relief from mental health concerns. Using interviews from 6 participants, coding of transcripts will be used to obtain a thick description. To strengthen the findings, several activities including: member check-in, inquiry audit, and triangulation will be utilized. It is our hope that the findings from this study could inform both private and public practitioners.

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