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A STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG MEDICAL SOCIAL WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN IBADAN, OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 epidemic had a major effect on the overall well-being and health of medical social workers in Nigeria, particularly in Ibadan, Oyo State. However, despite their role in healthcare, medical social workers in Nigeria received little recognition, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study employed purposive sampling and administered a validated data collection tool (questionnaire) to 102 of an estimated 150 medical social workers from various healthcare institutions in Ibadan. Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC).

Findings revealed a correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and the source of stress for medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria ($r(98) = .327, p < 0.05$). This indicated that medical social workers in Oyo State were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic due to stressors. The second hypothesis also showed a correlation between medical social workers' coping strategies and the COVID-19 pandemic ($r(278) = .425, p < 0.05$), highlighting that they employed coping mechanisms.

The research concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic posed severe stressors for medical social workers in Ibadan, despite the vital role they played. This lack of acknowledgement and the impact on their mental health underscored the need for better support systems and recognition in future health crises.

Keywords: Mental health, coping mechanisms, medical social workers, Oyo state, COVID-19, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The field of public health has been shaped by two main drivers: the advancement of scientific knowledge on disease understanding, prevention and response and the recognition of public health as a collective social responsibility. While scientific breakthroughs like the germ theory in the 19th century laid the foundation for disease control, it is in the last two decades, especially post 9/11, SARS and COVID-19, that evidence-based practice and public engagement in public health decision making have become central (Cárdenas-González & Álvarez-Buylla, 2020; Carbone & Thomas, 2018). More so, to understand of sickness prevention and control techniques advanced, more effective defences against health hazards have been developed. Now, different public organisations and agencies have been set up to use newly discovered treatments to combat health risks. As scientific knowledge expanded, public agencies were able to take on additional duties, including personal health care, sanitation, immunisation, regulation, and health education (Caron, Noel, Reed, Sibel, & Smith, 2023).

According to Atewologun et al. (2025), the term “mental health care” often refers to a variety of services, including as assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and counselling, that are intended to maintain and enhance people's mental health. One in four Nigerians, or an estimated 50 million people, are thought to have a mental illness (Alabi and Kanabe, 2020). The Nigerian Medical Association said during the 2020 World Mental Health Day celebration that more than 200 million Nigerians are now receiving treatment from 350 psychiatrists (Nigeria Medical Association, 2020). In Nigeria, a shortage of mental health professionals, poor infrastructure, and unfavourable public

perceptions of mental illness prevent over 80% of people with serious mental illnesses from receiving the treatment they need (Fadele et al., 2024).

Furthermore, between 2019 and 2022, there were several outbreaks of infectious diseases throughout the country. These illnesses consist of cholera, Lassa fever, monkey pox, and COVID-19. Some of these illnesses were easy to treat, but others caused serious problems for medical social workers and, in some cases, became unmanageable. Accounts of the challenges faced by social workers in Nigeria in the literature present a group of people who are committed to their profession but are demotivated by the terrible working conditions. Despite the existence of social workers in Nigeria's secondary and tertiary healthcare systems, their effectiveness is still subpar (Okoye, 2019; Okoye and Agwu, 2019). In February 2020, according to Worldometer, Nigeria announced the country's first COVID-19 case in Lagos. Since then, the 37 federating units of the country have seen over 60,000 cases and over 1000 deaths.

In addition to physiological and health-related risks, COVID-19 poses serious economic, psychological, emotional, and social risks to patients, healthcare professionals, and the general public (Cadell, 2020; SWHELPER, 2020). China and the US, among other high-income countries (HICs), have thus shown that fighting COVID-19 entails lowering the disease's socioeconomic and psychosocial risks in addition to preventing its physiological and health-related symptoms (IFSW, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Puffett, 2020; SWHELPER, 2020). When it comes to the advancement of the social work profession in Africa, South Africa is in the forefront. The South African social work profession is commended by UNICEF (2020), which specifically highlights their role in helping South Africans manage the socioeconomic hazards associated with confinement and their proper integration as frontline health professionals. Medical social workers are essential in South Africa and Nigeria when it comes to treating COVID-19 patients that arose during the epidemic utilising the biopsychosocial approach.

However, in order to combat the virus and its aftereffects, social work initiatives in addition to clinical treatment are essential, as shown by lessons learnt from South Africa and Nigeria. It is crucial to emphasise that although social workers were on the front lines to protect their clients' wellbeing, the Nigerian healthcare system endured unheard-of hardship as medical social workers' resources and staff were overextended. This may be linked to the medical social work service's lack of enough financing and readiness. Because medical social workers are crucial in providing psychological support and interventions to COVID-19 patients and their families, as well as to other healthcare professionals, this constitutes a significant gap in the research.

Hence, this study seeks to examine how the pandemic affected medical social workers in Ibadan, Oyo State, particularly focusing on their mental health and the coping strategies they employed. The following research questions guide this inquiry: (i) what is the extent of the pandemic's impact on the mental well-being of medical social workers? (ii) what are the sources and nature of stress they experienced? (iii) what coping strategies were employed during the pandemic? (iv) what challenges were faced in deploying these coping mechanisms?

Additionally, to guide this analysis, this study proposed two hypotheses:

H01: There is no significant relationship between sources of stress and the COVID-19 pandemic.

H02: There is no significant relationship between coping mechanisms and the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population consisted of medical social workers in healthcare facilities across Ibadan, Oyo State. A purposive sample of 102 respondents participated in the study.

A structured questionnaire was administered, and its reliability tested using Cronbach's alpha with values ranging from 0.711 to 0.742. Descriptive statistics were used for demographic and frequency analysis, while inferential statistics (PPMC) tested the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Effect of the Pandemic on Medical Social Workers' Mental Wellbeing

Table 1: Showing frequency distribution on degree of impact on COVID-19 pandemic

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Mean \bar{x}	SD
1	The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected my psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and professional identity as a medical social worker.	32 31.4%	67 65.7%	2 2.0%	1 0.9%	3.28	.552
2	How often do you experience stress as a medical social worker in Oyo State, Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	39 38.2%	42 41.2%	9 8.8%	12 11.8%	3.06	.983
Weighted mean = 3.1							

Table 1 above shows the frequency distribution on the degree of impact on the COVID-19 pandemic on medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria. The Covid-19 Pandemic Has Negatively Affected My Psychological Well-Being, Job Satisfaction, And Professional Identity As A Medical Social Worker was ranked highest by the mean score rating and was followed in succession by How Often Do You Experience Stress as a Medical Social Worker in Oyo State, Nigeria During The Covid-19 Pandemic? ($\bar{x} = 3.06$). The table shows the weighted mean of 3.10 > 2.50 is higher than the standard mean. This suggests that medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria, are significantly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic.

This aligns with the work of Afolabi (2020), who discovered that sleeplessness is seen to be the more significant of the two factors and that it strongly correlates favourably with depression. Similarly, research by Abdallah et al. (2020) discovered a strong correlation between depressive symptoms and stressful life events, such a pandemic. This supports the findings of the current research, which show that significant public health emergencies may significantly increase the risk of mental health issues developing. According to a similar perspective is Pearman et al's (2020) research that shows a strong correlation between depressed symptoms and very stressful events like pandemics. On the other hand, among adult Ibadan residents, anxiety and depression had the least significant positive association. According to Tsamakis et al. (2020), the COVID-19 epidemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of Nigerian frontline healthcare professionals. Similar findings were made by Johannes et al. (2021), who discovered that health and social care workers (HSCWs) were directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and had to shoulder a significant amount of the load while trying to contain the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to threaten human existence, according to Babatunde et al. (2021), and the virus's novel characteristics and unpredictable epidemiologic trajectory greatly alarmed international health specialists. It was found that the worries of the frontline medical staff had become so bad that they were delaying the response efforts. In order to slow down the spread of the established community transmission via monitoring measures, the community health professionals' concerns must be addressed. In order to ascertain if there are any discernible risk factors for poor mental health outcomes among healthcare workers during the COVID-19 crisis, maintaining their mental health is a primary priority.

Sources and Nature of Stressors

Table 2: Showing frequency distribution on source and nature of stress

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Mean \bar{x}	SD
1	What are the main sources of stress that you experience as a medical social worker in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	18 17.6%	35 34.3%	23 22.6%	26 25.5%	2.43	1.066
2	How often do you experience stress as a medical social worker in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	21 20.6%	40 39.2%	25 24.5%	16 15.7%	2.64	.990
3	How would you rate the intensity of your stress as a medical social worker in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	20 19.6%	30 29.4%	28 27.5%	24 23.5%	2.44	1.067
Weighted mean = 2.52							

Table 2 above shows the frequency distribution on the source and nature of stress factors the Oyo State medical social workers experience in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. How Often Do You Experience Stress as A Medical Social Worker in Nigeria during the Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.64) was ranked highest by the mean score rating and was followed in succession by How Would You Rate The Intensity Of Your Stress As A Medical Social Worker In Nigeria During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.44) and What Are The Main Sources Of Stress That You Experience As A Medical Social Worker In Nigeria During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.43). The table shows the weighted mean of 2.52 > 2.50 is higher than the standard mean. This implies that the source and nature of stress factors the Oyo State medical social workers experience in the context of COVID-19 pandemic is high.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the elements represent the cause and kind of stressors that Oyo State medical social workers encounter.

This corroborates the work of Babatunde et al. (2021), which identified comparable stressors, such as extended work hours, ongoing infection anxiety, inadequate personal protective equipment, family isolation, and exhaustion from handling a heavy patient load. Similar results were also found by Vanhaecht et al. (2020), who identified challenging economic circumstances and bonus payment delays as the main causes of stress for medical professionals. Furthermore, similar patterns were reported by Tsamakidis et al. (2020) that the respondents' level of COVID-19 understanding was mediocre. Concerns over the government and their personal feeling of satisfaction were expressed by the majority of Primary Health Care (PHC) employees. The same results were also emphasised by Ajibo et al. (2020), confirming that the lack of convenient mobility is the primary source of stress for medical frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This suggests that while issues including a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), low money, and a heavy workload were all significant, the stress accumulated was mostly caused by the challenges of transferring to different locations during emergency operations. The results presented here are also evident in the work of Ayinde et al. (2019), who found comparable stressors. Given that the second wave of COVID-19 has spread over much of Africa, including Nigeria, and has resulted in a significantly greater death toll, it is imperative that these challenges be addressed with a comprehensive strategy that considers the safety, welfare, and capacity development of health care workers (HCWs). Babatunde et al.'s (2021) research focusses on Oyo State's primary healthcare practitioners, the vast majority of whom are not social workers. The COVID-19 pandemic's psychological effects on medical social workers, who were at the forefront of client response.

Coping Strategies Used During the Pandemic

Table 3: Showing frequency distribution on type of coping mechanisms

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Mean \bar{x}	SD
1	What are the main coping mechanisms that you use as a medical social worker in Oyo State, Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	18 17.7%	35 34.3%	25 24.5%	24 23.5%	2.45	1.048
2	How Effective are the main coping mechanisms you use as a medical social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?	13 12.8%	38 37.3%	27 26.5%	24 23.5%	2.38	.993
3	How satisfied are you with the main coping mechanisms you used as a medical social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?	29 28.4%	39 38.2%	18 17.7%	16 15.7%	2.79	1.038
Weighted mean = 2.54							

Table 3 above shows the frequency distribution on the type of coping mechanisms that were employed by medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria, to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. How Satisfied Are You With The Main Coping Mechanisms You Used As A Medical Social Worker During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.79) was ranked highest by the mean score rating and was followed in succession by What Are The Main Coping Mechanisms That You Use As A Medical Social Worker In Oyo State, Nigeria During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.45) and How Effective Are The Main Coping Mechanisms You Use As A Medical Social Worker During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.38). The table shows the weighted mean of 2.54 > 2.50 is higher than the standard mean. This implies that the type of coping mechanisms employed by medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria, to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic is high. In order to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic, medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria, used a variety of coping strategies.

These findings align with Ojedokun's (2022) research, which demonstrated that crisis management in southwest Nigeria is influenced by the availability of medical services. Similarly, Ashcroft et al. (2021) found that frontline healthcare workers reported satisfaction with the coping strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besirli et al. (2021) also noted that these coping methods were effective in mitigating stress. In parallel, Munawar & Choudhry (2021) emphasized the role of coping mechanisms in sustaining both healthcare professionals' mental health and the broader capacity of the healthcare system to serve patients. Furthermore, Vizheh et al. (2020) reported that such strategies, while temporarily effective, played a critical role during the pandemic. Collectively, the evidence underscores that effective disaster management is closely tied to the availability of medical services. It also highlights that medical social work services significantly influence how healthcare institutions respond to emergencies and disasters.

Challenges in Coping Strategy Deployment

Table 4: Showing frequency distribution on types of challenge

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Mean \bar{x}	SD
1	What are the main challenges or barriers that you face in deploying coping strategies as a medical social worker in Oyo State, Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic?	20 19.6%	44 43.1%	23 22.6%	15 14.7%	2.67	.965
2	Inadequate resources like personal protective equipment, training and supervision	30 29.4%	59 57.8%	5 4.9%	8 7.8%	3.09	.818
3	Poor recognition and appreciation from other health professionals and the society.	35 34.3%	61 60.0%	4 3.9%	2 1.9%	3.27	.633
Weighted mean = 3.01							

Table 4 above shows the frequency distribution on the types of challenges faced in the deployment of coping strategies. Poor Recognition and Appreciation from Other Health Professionals and the Society. (\bar{x} =3.27) was ranked highest by the mean score rating and was followed in succession by Inadequate resources like personal protective equipment, training and supervision. (\bar{x} =3.09). What Are The Main Challenges Or Barriers That You Face In Deploying Coping Strategies As A Medical Social Worker In Oyo State, Nigeria During The Covid-19 Pandemic? (\bar{x} =2.67). The table shows the weighted mean of 3.01 > 2.50 is higher than the standard mean. This suggests that there are many different kinds of difficulties encountered while using coping mechanisms. Each of the elements represents the kinds of difficulties encountered while using coping mechanisms.

The findings correspond with Ojedokun's (2022) research. Similarly, Mfuh and Jafaru (2021) reported that healthcare personnel encountered significant challenges in applying coping mechanisms during the pandemic. Kelvin (2021) further observed that strict management practices in some healthcare facilities exacerbated these difficulties. Feinstein et al. (2020) also highlighted that a lack of knowledge regarding effective coping strategies contributed to worsening conditions for certain medical professionals. In line with this, Ayinde et al. (2019) found that while some healthcare workers initially struggled with implementing coping mechanisms, a balance between mental health and healthcare delivery was eventually established. Suryavanshi et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of medical social work services as a strategic component of post-COVID-19 care delivery. In Oyo State, Nigeria, Ojedokun (2022) extended social support to individuals affected by the pandemic, although without specifically addressing the mental health experiences of medical social workers. Ayinde et al. (2019) also stressed the importance of healthcare professionals' comprehension of intervention strategies during the COVID-19 crisis.

Hypotheses

HO 1: There is no significant relationship between sources of stress and the COVID-19 pandemic among medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria.

The first hypothesis examined the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the stress experienced by medical social workers. Statistical analysis using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between stress sources and the pandemic ($r = .327, p < 0.05$). This result led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The implication is that the onset and escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic directly contributed to increased stress levels among medical social workers. These stressors included emotional exhaustion, institutional neglect, and anxiety over health and safety. This finding aligns with studies such as Abdallah et al. (2020) and Babatunde et al. (2021), which emphasise the psychological vulnerabilities of frontline healthcare workers during large-scale public health emergencies.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, this relationship can be interpreted using the Erikson's psychosocial framework. The inability of the system to recognize and support medical social workers may have impaired their sense of contribution and effectiveness, increasing vulnerability to psychological distress and undermining their identity as caregivers.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between coping mechanisms and the COVID-19 pandemic among medical social workers in Oyo State, Nigeria.

The second hypothesis assessed whether the coping strategies adopted by medical social workers were significantly related to their experiences during the pandemic. The results showed a statistically significant positive correlation between the coping mechanisms employed and the impact of the pandemic ($r = .425, p < 0.05$), resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis.

This finding suggests that the use of various coping strategies, such as emotional support, spiritual practices, peer communication, and mental resilience, was strongly influenced by the heightened demands of the COVID-19 crisis. It demonstrates the adaptability of medical social workers in responding to adversity despite systemic limitations. This is consistent with research by Vizheh et al. (2020) and Munawar & Choudhry (2021), who observed similar adaptive behaviours in health workers globally.

Finally, Erikson's psychosocial theory offers further insight, highlighting that in the face of crisis, individuals strive to preserve their roles and sense of meaning. The coping mechanisms observed reflect efforts to maintain a stable identity and psychological balance within the "generativity vs. stagnation" stage of adult development. These strategies can therefore be seen not only as survival tools but also as acts of resilience and self-preservation in a stressed healthcare system.

Conclusion

The research concluded that there is a tendency of stresses for medical social workers in Ibadan and found that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on medical social workers is severe. The difficulties that medical social workers face were also recognized. This makes it easier to address these issues head-on since, in the long term, it will enhance the quality of services provided by medical social workers in Ibadan and, eventually, promote more comprehensive treatment of health issues in Oyo State, Nigeria, and the global community. The findings of this study aligns with the tenets of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. It underscores the importance of empowerment, social support, and resilience in overcoming trauma. In contexts like Oyo State, Nigeria, it helps medical social workers understand and address psychological and social challenges caused by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, while also identifying factors that impact their coping abilities.

In light of these findings, the study recommends the following actions to be taken by the government and relevant stakeholders in the health sector. To start with, there is a need to provide

adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical social workers to ensure their safety during public health emergencies. Also, it is important to foster unity and collaboration among healthcare professionals. This is crucial for delivering holistic and integrated care. Furthermore, there must be deliberate efforts to prioritize and prepare for the mental health needs of medical social workers within the healthcare system. Finally, more research should be encouraged and funded to strengthen the field of medical social work and improve the quality and reach of its services.

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