

TRADITIONAL HEALERS' EXPLANATORY MODELS OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN CAPE TOWN

Siyabulela Mkabile
University of Cape Town
Stellenbosch University
Lentegeur Hospital
Cape Town, South Africa

I work as a clinical psychologist in intellectual disability services at Lentegeur Hospital in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town, South Africa. As a clinical psychologist, I was trained in Western Biomedical form where my cultural background was not recognised. I am a Xhosa speaking clinician and attend to many individuals and families from various cultural background. In my line of work it became clear early on that primary caregivers of children and adults with intellectual disability (ID) struggled to understand intellectual disability, its causes and treatment as explained by doctors within the hospital. I have found furthermore that some parents struggle to disclose the child's intellectual disability to extended family members and to the community. Some report that they fear being stigmatised by the community as they view a child with ID as a "curse". There have been cases where children have been locked alone inside their homes, institutionalised or abandoned in children's homes. Others have admitted seeking alternative forms of health care existing in the community.

These observations led to an interest in investigating the phenomenon of Black African parents and carers of children with ID in order to understand their experiences of raising a child with ID, and to establish how their understanding of ID influences their health care seeking behaviours and experiences. I also wanted to know more about alternative care providers in the ID field.

Abstract:

Background: While intellectual disability (ID) is experienced world-wide, with much greater rates in contexts of poverty, relatively few studies on ID have been conducted in low- and middle-income countries. High levels of ID in South Africa exist alongside high levels of poverty, malnutrition and poor or inaccessible healthcare services. The lack of access to services partly explains why many turn to traditional healers (THs). Within this context there is very limited research on the role that traditional healers play in relation to ID in South Africa. The current study investigated traditional healers' understanding, and beliefs about intellectual disabilities and the treatment modalities that they use. Methods: An exploratory qualitative research design was used to examine the views and perspectives of THs on intellectual disability. Fifteen traditional healers participated in the study. Results: Key findings show that the naming of and the terminology used to describe and identify ID are very much similar to what has been observed in African cultures in general where ID is identified as an abnormality. Some traditional healers located the presentation of ID within the biomedical sphere while others gave supernatural explanations for how ID presents in children and for its causes. All THs expressed a willingness to work with the Western formal healthcare system.

Conclusion: Findings on traditional healers' views on future collaborations with the formal health system provide opportunities for these two forms of health care services to be synergised for the strengthening and improvement of services provided to children with ID and their families.