

DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND CARE SEEKING BEHAVIORS IN NORTHERN HAITI: AN ASSESSMENT OF DEMOGRAPHIC, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AMONG PATIENTS AT THE FIRST MENTAL HEALTH CLINIC IN THE REGION

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Background: Mental health is a neglected field in low- and middle-income countries. Populations in countries such as Haiti demonstrate a high level of need for mental health care despite a lack of services and trained professionals. In addition to the dearth of biomedical services, local belief systems and explanatory models lead a majority of the population to rely on traditional medicine as their first option for care.

Objectives: This study is among the first epidemiologic studies of mental illness belief systems and symptomology in northern Haiti. Using a mixed-methods approach, we aim to characterize mental illness at the first mental health clinic in the region – Sant Sante Mantal Mòn Pele (SSMMP) – by sampling 96 patients through culturally validated instruments including demographic questionnaires, and anxiety, depression, and functionality scales.

Methods: Multivariate linear and logistic regression models were conducted with outcomes including whether patients believed their illness was caused by sent spirits or previously visited a Vodou priest for treatment, as well as depression, anxiety, and functionality scale scores.

Findings: Results indicate high levels of mental illness among this population, with 76% having depression and 45% moderate to severe anxiety. Patients experienced an average of three traumatic events that impacted their mental health and 57% reported to be in poor physical health. Additionally, 75% of patients believe their illness is due to sent spirits and 42% previously visited Vodou priests for treatment.

Conclusion: As many patients believed their illnesses – both mental and physical – were due to sent spirits, Vodou priests were often the first recourse when seeking treatment, with some patients delaying biomedical care for years. Culturally-competent, evidence-based mental health services, such as those offered at SSMMP represent a unique opportunity to appropriately treat those suffering from mental illness in this region.

Full List of Authors

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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Describe multiple social, economic, and environmental factors that impact mental health in rural northern Haiti.
2. Recognize the relationship between mental illness care pathways and belief systems in the Vodou cosmology in this region.