

Coronavirus and Psychology: Africentric Perspectives**Therese Mungah Shalo Tchombe Ph.D.***Centre for Research in Child and Family Development and Education*

SUMMARY. COVID-19 is a highly contagious disease that causes severe respiratory problems and grave challenges to health care systems worldwide. The psychological dissonance created by this pandemic breathes suspicion, lack of faith, and trust, including mixed and faulty beliefs about those claiming to provide solutions. Whatever the situation, the pathways for treatment cannot be restrictive since it is still unclear what exactly is being treated. Some people feel there is much trial and error in what exactly the treatment is, as people are dying and being buried with no dignity or respect. Knowledge of managing the treatment of Coronavirus cannot be the monopoly of the developed world because the developing countries, for example, Africa, have had to handle various types of pandemics. The concepts defining these two worldviews are simply visions of people's state of mind that impacts their mind theory, evident in their manifested behavior when dealing with events and complex situations in life. Accordingly, most people refuse to go to the hospital for fear of wrong diagnosis and treatment. Others feel they may be left to die alone with none of their loved ones by their side. The outbreak of COVID-19 affects people on three levels: physically, psychologically, and spiritually. At the physical level, there are legislations about testing, social distancing, and self-isolation or quarantine; at the psychological level, people try to internalize the understanding of this phenomenon along with its generated emotions and find out how to manage the situation through reviewing of the lifestyle that may influence mental health. As a concern, spiritual individuals pray, meditate, and invoke their ancestors through sacrifices. I have personalized COVID-19 as an enigma if one can comfortably qualify it because of the uncertainties and paradoxes it creates in peoples' psychological well-being. [COVID-19, Psychological wellbeing, Spirituality, Development, Enigma]

Introduction

COVID-19 is a new and challenging disease characterized as a pandemic that threatens the health and psychology of millions of people worldwide. As we know, the coronavirus is a highly contagious disease that causes severe respiratory problems and grave challenges to health systems worldwide. The World Health

Organization has issued guidelines for managing pain from biomedical and physical perspectives. We are yet to see the mechanism put in place to address the psychological traumas caused, just as we may want to understand the place of indigenous practices and their effectiveness. We are yet to see the extent to which scientific stance comments on the value of indigenous medicine as a support within the diversity of intervention strategies. While preventive and medical actions are the most critical intervention strategies at this stage, emerging psychological and traditional interventions for people affected by COVID-19 are also necessary and awaited. Furthermore, it could be the case that people become confused about what is the best form of medication given the multiple ways of treating COVID-19 and the confusion about vaccines. Many people revert to spiritual approaches and traditional treatments. The psychological dissonance created by this pandemic breathes suspicion, lack of faith, and trust, including mixed and faulty beliefs about those claiming to provide solutions. Whatever the situation, pathways for treatment cannot be restrictive since it is still unclear what is being treated. There is much trial and error, and people are dying and buried with no dignity or respect. Accordingly, most people refuse to go to the hospital for fear of wrong diagnosis and treatment. Patients are afraid they will be left to die alone with none of their loved ones by their side. The outbreak of COVID-19 affects people on three levels: physically, mentally, and spiritually. At the physical level, there are legislations about testing, social distancing, and self-isolation or quarantine; psychologically, people are trying to internalize the understanding of this phenomenon that generates an array of emotions. They are trying to find out how to manage it by reviewing lifestyles that may influence mental health and how the disease is managed. As concerns arise, spiritual individuals pray, meditate, and invoke their ancestors through sacrifices in the hope that they will see it through these trying times.

Following the commentary above, I continue to develop this paper, assuming that COVID-19 is an enigma. From this perspective, the rest of the article addresses

the imponderables of COVID-19 as barriers to healthy development, psychological beliefs, interventions, and conclusion.

Imponderables of COVID-19 as Barriers to Healthy Development

I see COVID-19 as an enigma if one can comfortably qualify it because of the uncertainties and paradoxes it creates in the domains of peoples' psychological, socioeconomic, beliefs, and spiritual life.

Psychologically, the implications on the affected and those not involved are numerous because these implications impact all aspects of life. The emerging challenges can turn into forms of denial because fear of the unknown makes people panic and suffer from different anxiety-related concerns. Imposed restrictions increased fear and anxiety. The problems of social isolation, social distancing, lockdown, and engaging in usual socio-economic activities for most people become very difficult. Fear, depression, frustration, and anxiety build up because of uncertainty. These issues and challenges impact the basic sustenance of quality livelihood, healthy development for children, and financial demands of all sorts, increasing in this manner, psychological burdens not only among the elderly and parents but for children and the youth as well. These burdens on development find justifications in Erikson (1950), Bronfenbrenner (1986), Maslow (1962), and other developmental theories that focus on the ways the trajectories of the environment can deter healthy development, mainly when social policy is ill-conceived because most often it is not evidence-based. The effects can also be seen where health systems, based practices, and research do not engage the social sciences to understand how ill health can lead to complex behavior unrelated to the illness, thus deterring recovery. The lack of knowledge about illness conditions that consider the interplay of cultural, social, and religious beliefs may hamper the healing or recovery process. The emotions mentioned above represent the consequences of the

uncertainties caused by COVID-19. These could be damaging as they affect the individual's mind theory, overwhelming its capacity to manage the challenges experienced.

For those parents with children, their unpreparedness and inability to meet the needs of children growing up, such as access to quality education, balanced meals, and the monitoring of their children's sexual behavior because of idleness, frustrates parents. These actions lead younger children to lose their virginity and others to become pregnant with their sibling's baby. Parents also feel that their frustration could be overcome through excessive intimate relationships with one another or engaging in excessive drinking. These situations render relationships with children in challenging positions, with each of the partners perhaps feeling overbearing.

Growing up during this period is also traumatic for children and youths themselves as they worry and become anxious about their future. Moreover, the effect of schools' closure as part of a necessary measure to avoid the spread of the virus has implications on children and the youth as they lose their sense of structure and the kind of stimulation that a healthy environment provides. This is the case because children and the youth have less opportunity to be with their friends and get that social support essential for mental well-being. Besides, they could be exposed to increased sexual and social violence risks. Creating safe home spaces for children and adolescents puts undue pressure on parents and caregivers to step up surveillance. In a well-organized welfare state, the government would put mechanisms to support vulnerable parents who need such support. Given that traditional settings are communal and characterized by sound social support systems, this is the time that such strategies should be harnessed systemically to make available community support for those in dire need.

The dimensions of anxiety involve avoiding being infected, protecting children and family, and the desire to return to normality. For example, reopening schools without adequate preparedness for teachers, pupils, and students must be seriously reviewed. The emerging questions are what psychosocial support needs to be in place for pupils and students, teachers, and administrative staff. It would be necessary to raise the issue of safe school spaces, which can be a significant challenge. These, among others, put pressure on the psychology of individuals unaffected, but I suggest further research to identify the etiological inferences that create increasing psychological dissonances. How, therefore, would this knowledge help support peoples' ability to adjust, adapt and cope with the stress of seeking new ways of doing things? In grappling with this new trend, impacting lives negatively, there must be ways of how people should cope with the uncertainty that has suddenly altered the everyday lifestyles of different communities and age groups which are well stated below:

Dr. Hans Kluge says the issue facing everyone is how we manage and react to the stressful situation unfolding so rapidly in our lives and communities. Here we can draw on the remarkable powers of strength and cooperation we possess as humans. And that is what we must try to focus on to respond most effectively to this crisis as individuals, family, community members, friends, and colleagues (WHO, Regional Director for Europe).

Spirituality and beliefs about the world enable the individual to build inner strength to cope and be resilient. Illnesses of such magnitude claim many lives and can never be perceived just from a biological perspective that defines only one way of intervening. There is a need for a holistic approach blending Afrocentric health with Eurocentric. Before Western medicine came onto the continent, Africans had sophisticated medical procedures for healing (Tchombe 2016). These practices included using plants to heal pain, diarrhea, and malaria, as confirmed in the 20th century (Van Sertima 1983). Ancient African legacies are plenty and have had

implications throughout the world in all aspects impacting humanity and development. It is a pity that some traditional treatments that have helped COVID-19 patients heal are being rejected.

The lockdown and social distancing must be difficult for most Africans, given that the very essence of African life is communal. South African Ubuntu philosophy has captured this well, depicting positive ways of living through respecting human dignity and differences. It provides the basis of the African Humanistic theory. The social support system embedded in African culture is irreplaceable. Most traditional communities depend on a network of reciprocal relationships that keep people together. Today, the newly manufactured disease creates disagreement among researchers and practitioners about whether it should be a virus or bacteria. So, which denominations should we accept, particularly as the same people who manufactured the virus or bacteria have new narratives with controversies regarding curative measures in the so-called vaccine? This multifaceted situation of a virus and bacteria demands everyone to develop a positive psychological response to cope. This situation also begs people to build an anti-stress mechanism through meditation, prayers, and reflections that help create a solid invulnerable rejoinder and faith.

Once the psychological effects are understood through the emotional manifestations of fear, and anxiety and frustration become overwhelming, people render themselves vulnerable. Developing responsiveness skills should provide strength to cope. Let me turn to the African traditional religion for some orientations.

African Traditional Religion and Spirituality

I will not attempt to distinguish between the two concepts of traditional religion and spirituality here. Still, I will highlight that Afrocentric values focus

much on African Traditional Religion and Spirituality and their implications on African traditional medicine. Much inspiration impacts the identification and production of African traditional medicine. In most traditional settings, viruses like COVID-19 or any other epidemic plaguing a community commonly could be understood as evil spiritual forces. They would require sacrifices to be offered to the ancestors and deities for cleansing. Perhaps as we speak, some communities are engaged in such practices to the extent that even hospital treatment intertwines with these practices. It is important to note that the content of traditional heritage is derived from the spiritual environment, whereby spiritual significance is essential in healing. Religion plays a vital role in the life of Africans by providing a rallying point for the community, backed up by socially accepted values and norms such as honesty, generosity, diligence, and hospitality (Ocitti 1971). In today's context, pandemics such as the Coronavirus, a pandemic that kills many people, the spiritual effect seems not to have entered the conversation. Yet there is concern about those dying with no one to prepare or support them. This evokes concern about the state of an individual's soul. We are all aware and would agree that spiritual well-being is alien to many people's daily lives. With the decline of organized religion, millions of people experience a sick soul. However, you want to define it. Maslow's (1966) article on "*Religions, values, and peak experiences*" is worth reading for some orientations on the issue raised. In this current time, therefore, there will be patients with weariness of heart, a sinking feeling, and giving up without finding a way out, but with spiritual uplifting, they can have peace.

COVID-19: The Emerging Spiritual Paradox

African Traditional Religion teaches us that every person has a body and a soul and that Africans are notoriously religious (Mbiti 1969). The Africans cannot be separated from their religion. Within African cultures, diseases of high social impact,

affecting almost everyone in the community, were approached from a spiritual dimension. Sacrifices would be offered to the deities and ancestors to intercede to God almighty to redeem the land from such an evil force. The paradox is that modern society neglects the spiritual rather than lay health measures. COVID-19 has received little or no spiritual attention. Instead, churches have been closed, while markets, bars, etc., are left open. This is paradoxical because in a typical African way of doing things, such diseases called for closures of markets, drinking places, farms, etc., and everyone gathered around the shrine to offer sacrifices for cleansing.

The neglect of the spiritual dimension of this pandemic contradicts African Traditional Spirituality, whereby there is an interaction between nature, humans, and the supernatural. As Mbiti (1969) highlights, spirituality cannot be cut off from the African worldview because wherever the African is, there is religion. Therefore, traditional African healing goes beyond the physical to embrace the spiritual; the world neglects this spiritual dimension.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

This paper reflects the psychological outcomes of COVID-19 on the lives of children and their parents and caregivers. It raises critical concerns regarding the challenges of an unsafe environment for healthy development. It also addresses the psychological conflicts such a situation creates and its challenging effects on an individual's emotions that hamper healthy growth or living. This paper also raises concerns about the negligence of African traditional healing approaches, even as first aid. These should be brought into the conversation as many (both blacks and whites) are using these African traditional healing approaches with positive results. In addressing these curative measures, the paper raises issues related to religion or spirituality, which could provide hope through faith. The report contends that one's level of spirituality can help overcome some of the emotional traumas caused by

COVID-19. Even the ability to manage the family setting can be enhanced by spiritual standing. Children are very perceptive and will model how to respond to challenges based on how parents respond. But of course, parents also need to be supported in managing their stressors to be good models for their children, particularly in how they put creative activities and provide structure daily to enable children to express themselves. Mental health and psychosocial support services and child protection services for the children of families in need should be in place.

Moreover, essential issues that need to be addressed to develop psychological interventions for all include adverse psychological impacts and psychopathological symptoms that might occur among the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research goal should stimulate novel investigations and theoretical perspectives on how people are psychologically affected by and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus should be placed on how to help people manage and adjust to critical situations. In particular, schools have been reopened. What are safety measures in place for children and teachers besides social distancing, hand washing, and sanitizers? What incentives are in place for teachers and other healthcare workers in and out of schools? The risk factors in developing stress should be reduced to the minimum by improving well-being and promoting preventive behavior already in place. Further, emphasis should be placed on how governments establish evidence-based strategies to improve public and clinical intervention systems and provide psychosocial support and safe school spaces for all. In addition, research should focus on effectively elucidating strategies to manage mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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