

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Psychological experiences of pregnant students at the University of Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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## Abstract

There is an increase in pregnancy rates among university students, world-wide. Unplanned pregnancy is a threat to the psychological well-being of students, as it could lead to mental health problems. The purpose of the study was to explore the psychological experiences of pregnant students at the University of Venda, in Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative approach, using a phenomenological design, was used for this study and convenience sampling was used to select 12 pregnant students from the target population. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview and an interpretative phenomenological approach was used to analyse the data. The study findings showed that pregnant students encountered various negative experiences, such as maternal stress, inability to cope, poor concentration and anxiety. From the study, it is recommended that the institution should offer adequate services to pregnant students, such as providing antenatal care services at the university clinic to alleviate stress, anxiety and the dropout rate among pregnant students. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2020; 24[3]: 18-23).

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**Keywords:** Female students, Maternal stress, Pregnancy, Psychological support

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## Résumé

Il y a une augmentation des taux de grossesse parmi les étudiants universitaires, dans le monde entier. Les grossesses non planifiées constituent une menace pour le bien-être psychologique des élèves, car elles pourraient entraîner des problèmes de santé mentale. Le but de l'étude était d'explorer les expériences psychologiques d'étudiantes enceintes à l'Université de Venda, dans la province du Limpopo, en Afrique du Sud. Une approche qualitative, utilisant un plan phénoménologique, a été utilisée pour cette étude et un échantillonnage de convenance a été utilisé pour sélectionner 12 étudiantes enceintes de la population cible. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un entretien semi-structuré et une approche phénoménologique interprétative a été utilisée pour analyser les données. Les résultats de l'étude ont montré que les étudiantes enceintes ont rencontré diverses expériences négatives, telles que le stress maternel, l'incapacité de faire face, une faible concentration et l'anxiété. D'après l'étude, il est recommandé que l'établissement offre des services adéquats aux étudiantes enceintes, comme des services de soins prénatals à la clinique universitaire pour atténuer le stress, l'anxiété et le taux d'abandon chez les étudiantes enceintes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2020; 24[3]: 18-23).

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**Mots-clés:** Étudiantes, Stress maternel, Grossesse, Soutien psychologique

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## Introduction

Pregnancy among young females is increasing, especially among students at tertiary institutions. According to Lebesse *et al*<sup>1</sup>, more and more students are getting pregnant and this increase is worrisome, given the alarming trend of increasing numbers of people suffering from human immune virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)<sup>1</sup>. Among 210 million pregnancies that are reported every year

worldwide, almost 529, 000 females die from pregnancy-related challenges<sup>2</sup>. Different psychological experiences, including maternal stress have been identified among pregnant students. Maternal stress can lead to learning and memory difficulties and as well as causing emotional and behavioural problems for the unborn baby<sup>3,4</sup>.

In developing countries, youths are faced with reproductive health problems, such as unplanned pregnancy, early childbearing, unsafe

abortion, contracting HIV/ AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases<sup>5</sup>. In South Africa, 61% of community college students who fell pregnant while studying did not complete their studies, and about 38% of the students dropped out from the community college. The South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 stipulates that pregnant students can continue to be in school while pregnant and can return after the birth of their babies; this might have contributed to an upsurge in pregnancy rates in educational institutions. According to Makhaza and Ige<sup>6</sup>, there has been an increase in the pregnancy rate at the University of Zululand because students hardly use contraceptives<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, the University of Limpopo<sup>7</sup> (Turloop campus) has experienced a drastic increase in pregnancy among students, despite the presence of a Health Centre which offers contraceptives<sup>7</sup>. This is also the case at the University of Venda, where pregnancies reported at the campus health centre rose from 77 in 2011 to 104 in 2013<sup>8</sup>.

Unplanned pregnancy is a threat to students' psychological well-being, and this can lead to mental health problems, including substance abuse<sup>9</sup>. Being a mother-to-be can trigger psychological problems, such as anxiety, stress, inability to make decisions, fear of the future and frustration; these challenges can have a negative impact on students' studies<sup>10</sup>.

Daily, the researchers come across several pregnant students, some of whom had had to abandon their studies, subsequently. This had aroused some concern and a desire to investigate how pregnant students are coping with both the demands of their academic work and pregnancy. The study, hence, focused on the psychological experiences of pregnant students in a tertiary institution. One central question was formulated: "What are the experiences of pregnant students at the University of Venda"?

## Methods

### Research design

The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design. The researchers sought to understand the psychological

experiences faced by pregnant students by listening and analyzing their stories<sup>11</sup>.

### Study setting

The study was conducted in 2016, at the University of Venda, situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The University has a total number of 15 210 students (in the year 2016) of whom 8 227 were females. The Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), reported that "4 or 5 students in any one module are pregnant<sup>1</sup>". Furthermore, UNIVEN Campus Health report of 2015 revealed that pregnancy cases rose from 77 in 2013 to 104 in 2014<sup>1</sup>. There is a health-care centre at the University, however, pregnant students are referred to external clinics for antenatal care services.

### Population and sampling

The study targeted 104 pregnant students enrolled at the University of Venda, Limpopo Province. A convenience sampling approach was used to select 12 pregnant students<sup>12</sup> and data collection was through interviews which were conducted until data saturation stage was reached.

### Data collection process

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide for collecting the data. One central question was formulated and asked - ***What are the psychological experiences you encounter as a pregnant student?*** The researchers made initial appointments with the participants during which details were provided about the study and participants were informed about their rights concerning participation in the study. Further questions were used to probe unexpected issues arising during the interview, to get an in-depth understanding of all the issues<sup>13</sup>. A voice recorder was used during the interviews after obtaining permission from the participants, prior to the commencement of the interviews. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal responses; each interview took a maximum of 1 hour and the interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks.

## **Data analysis**

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses (IPA) was used for analysing the interview transcripts with the aim of getting an in-depth exploration of how the participants interpreted the phenomenon being studied<sup>13</sup>. Data were analysed using multiple steps - reading and making notes, transforming notes into emergent themes, seeking relationships, as well as clustering themes and sub-themes that came out<sup>13</sup>.

## **Measures to ensure trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured under the following aspects - credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability<sup>14</sup>. All these aspects addressed the appropriateness and effectiveness of the methodologies used in collecting and analysing data. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants to build trust; the use of a voice recorder and field notes ensured dependability; the transcribed data were taken back to the participants for confirmation and transferability was maintained by a clear description of the sampling method used to select the study participants<sup>15</sup>.

## **Results**

### **Participants' age and level of study**

A total of 12 pregnant students participated in the study. A summary of the demographic information of participants is provided in Table 1. The majority of the participants were in level three of their studies and interviewing them was totally at their convenience which posed some challenges. None of the participants was married and no co-habiting was noted. Pregnant students expressed various psychological experiences encountered during their pregnancies. The main theme and sub-themes that emerged during data analysis of this study are summarised in Table 2.

## **Discussion**

Psychological experiences which pregnant students encountered at the University of Venda

include, maternal stress and anxiety, inability to cope, poor concentration and low self-esteem. These sub-themes are discussed below.

### **Maternal stress and anxiety**

Most participants indicated that they were stressed and had feelings of anxiety. There are different factors that contribute to maternal stress and anxiety among pregnant students at educational institutions. One of the contributing factors is poor support and rejection by partners, however, these were not documented in numerical forms. The following excerpt was recorded:

*"Ya well; I do get stressed a lot but then ah! You know just looking at the situation right now, the boyfriend has decided to live his own life right now and I have mine right now. I'm having stress on how I am going to cope and everything. Although I have enough support from home at some point, I wish he could be there just to support me, at some point I stress, you know, cry". (P1).*

The findings of the study revealed that lack of support from partners contributes to stress during pregnancy. That could in turn increase the likelihood of absenteeism and dropout rate among pregnant students. Furthermore, pregnant students were, initially, afraid to confide in their parents about the pregnancy because parents had high expectations of them. These findings correlate with those of a study that was conducted in other parts of South Africa<sup>17</sup>. One study pointed out that pregnant female students feel stressed because it appears as if the pregnancy does not affect the father of the baby, in the sense that the father is able to carry on with his normal life. In a similar vein, Agunbiade *et al*<sup>18</sup> explained that pregnancy only affects the females, especially when it is from a pre-marital relationship<sup>18</sup>. Another contributing factor was excessive worry about the well-being of the child and fear of labour. The following excerpts were recorded:

*"Sometimes I worry about if I'm going to get a healthy child or if I'm going to get an operation" (P2). "The baby like, it's scary and it's my 1st time. I'm scared. What kind of a baby will I give birth to? And how will be the pains of labour?" (P7).*

**Table 1:** The demographic information of pregnant students at the University of Venda, South Africa (n=12), (2016)

| Characteristics | Category     | Number (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|
| Age             | 19 – 20      | 4 (33%)    |
|                 | 21 – 22      | 5 (42%)    |
|                 | 23 and above | 3 (25%)    |
| Level of study  | 1            | 2 (16%)    |
|                 | 2            | 2 (16%)    |
|                 | 3            | 6 (50%)    |

**Table 2:** Psychological experiences of pregnant students at the University of Venda, South Africa (2016)

| Theme   | Sub-themes                      |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Factors related to psychological experiences | 1.1 Maternal Stress and Anxiety |
|   | 1.2 Inability to cope           |
|   | 1.3 Poor concentration          |
|   | 1.4 Low-self esteem             |

The findings of the study revealed that the well-being of the baby was a concern amongst some of the participants. Previous studies indicate that due to uncertainty during pregnancy, a mother worries about the well-being of her child<sup>19</sup>. Some of the participants were anxious about their ability to support the child. These findings correlate with the findings of Makhaza and Ige<sup>6</sup>, which point out that pregnant students worry excessively about their ability to take care of the upcoming baby.

***Inability to cope***

The findings of the study showed that some of the pregnant students had difficulties moving between classes. They found the need to be constantly moving very tiring and hectic. To corroborate this view, Malahlela<sup>17</sup> indicated that moving between classes could be detrimental to the health of pregnant students<sup>17</sup>. Participant Seven indicated that being pregnant and away from home with no support from family members and her partner were some of the reasons she was failing to cope. She expressed herself as follows:

*“Like I’m alone here, my parents are somewhere there and then my boyfriend is there, I’m alone, sometimes I feel stressed because I come back from school tired, maybe I’m feeling some pains and I have to cook” (P7).*

These findings were also echoed by Coetzee and Ngunyulu<sup>20</sup>, who pointed out that juggling various roles during pregnancy, without the necessary support, leaves pregnant students feeling overwhelmed. In the same vein, Lebeso *et al*<sup>1</sup> stated that coping with both pregnancy and school is challenging. Contrary to this, in this study, some pregnant students indicated that they can cope with their studies<sup>1</sup>.

***Poor concentration***

Four of the participants indicated that they were unable to concentrate during class because of fatigue, however, this phenomenon was mostly experienced by pregnant students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of pregnancy. The following excerpts were recorded:

*“When I’m not tired, I concentrate normally but when I’m tired, I fall asleep” (P6). “I usually can concentrate for a period, maybe the lecture is a double period, which is about two hours long. After an hour I lose it. When the lecture begins everything is fine but after an hour then you can see it’s been too long, I feel tired and I want to eat, sometimes I find myself yawning so much that I can’t control it” (P9). “If I’m feeling sleepy that’s when I’m not able to concentrate” (P10).*

The findings of the study showed that pregnant students experienced low levels of concentration. Lack of concentration during class has a detrimental effect on academic pursuits as students ought to concentrate in class to achieve the learning outcomes of the courses, hence, to progress. In support of the study findings, Chauke<sup>21</sup> stated that lack of concentration lowers educational performance amongst pregnant students<sup>21</sup>. One of the reasons pregnant students fail to concentrate in lectures is their inability to get enough rest due to the demands of their school work and the condition of being pregnant<sup>10</sup>.

***Low self-esteem***

Two participants reported that they had developed low self-esteem because of gaining weight. To support this, the following excerpt was recorded:

“You see, girls are always dressed up cute, looking beautiful and you just look at yourself and you are turning out to be this fat person every day. I think I get jealous hey. Sometimes I feel like I’m ugly and girls will give you that look and you start asking yourself what is she looking at and you here at F54 [student residence] we have older people, they just look at you and don’t say anything, that makes me feel uncomfortable” (P5).

As a result of gaining weight during pregnancy, two participants had lost their self-esteem. These participants no longer felt comfortable with their looks; they considered themselves as “fat and ugly”. Inanir *et al*<sup>22</sup> reported similar findings by stating that due to weight gain during pregnancy, pregnant students may feel unattractive<sup>22</sup>. In another study, it was found that one thing pregnant students did not like about pregnancy was weight gain which also contributed to their low self-esteem<sup>19,2</sup>.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Venda, Ethics Committee. Ethical considerations such as permission to conduct the study, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, the right to privacy and avoidance of harm were observed throughout the study<sup>16</sup>.

## Limitations of the Study

The results of the study cannot be easily generalised to other population because the study was only limited to pregnant students who were enrolled at the University of Venda.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study revealed specific psychological experiences among pregnant students, such as maternal stress and anxiety, fatigue the result of which was poor concentration during lectures, hence an inability to balance their pregnancies and studies. Additionally, due to weight gain, some pregnant students developed low self-esteem. From these observations, the study recommends that higher educational

institutions should provide psychological support, including counselling to pregnant students and health facilities at these institutions must make provision to render antenatal care services.

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## Contribution of Authors

TBL designed the study, collected and analysed data, interpreted and discussed the findings under the supervision of MSA and TA. MSA further prepared and revised the manuscript and TA provided inputs in finalising the manuscripts. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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