The Role of Psychosocial Factors on Perceived Impact of Oil 'Scrambling' in the Niger-Delta: A Community's Experience
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Chovwen, Catherine - Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
E-mail- chovwenc@yahoo.com

Alarape, A. I. - Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Asagba, R. B. - Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has been plagued with recurrent crisis emanating from perceived injustice, degradation and neglect of residents in such areas. For example, violent reactions from militant youths have become unpredictable and uncontrollable; a situation that has rendered the region volatile and stressful. This study investigated the influence of personal and social variables such as locus of control and social support on adjustment to stressful life event resulting from incessant crisis. A total of two hundred subjects drawn from a violence-ridden community participated in the quantitative study. The findings indicated that females perceived their experiences to be more stressful than males, those with internal locus of control reported less stressful experience than those with external locus of control, while residents who had stayed in such environments for a longer time experienced lower stress than those on shorter time. The findings of the study highlighted the importance of psychosocial factors in alleviating the impact of stress and programs to develop locus of control and strengthen the social support of people in crisis ridden environments.

Key words: Stressful life events, locus of control, social support, depression and psychosocial factors.

Introduction

Every environment is endowed with both human and material resources for continuity and survival. Material resources especially considered as natural endowment are expected to be enjoyed or adequately harnessed for the benefit of individuals and communities enriched with these resources. In fact, they are expected to promote growth and development of both the citizenry and society. The concept of human development is a fundamental issue and the end goal of all development process. The Human Development Report (1990) defines the basic purpose of development as the expansion of choices that people have to lead lives that they have reasons to value, a life that affords individuals the opportunity to make choices. However, this is far from reality especially in developing countries where there is real or perceived discrimination and deprivation in relation to the use and allocation of resources and resulting benefits. When this happens, problems arise. For example, competition for control over resources in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has often resulted into crisis. This is so because ownership and effective utilization of resources (whether natural, technological or intellectual) enhances sense of fulfillment, achievement, dignity well being and overall development. Consequently, lack or deprivation resulting from denial orchestrated by a dominant group may be perceived as unfavorable and discriminatory and subsequent reaction against this is often destructive. The struggle for recognition and inclusion often overshadow the sense of personal responsibility and conscience and surrender to communal impulse that is beyond imagination. Our self concept contains not just our personal identity but our social identity because humans are group bound; thus, humans cheer for their group, kill and die for their group (Myers, 1999). In line with this view, the more important our social identity and the more strongly attached we feel to a group, the more we react prejudicially to threats from another group (Hinkle, et al 1992)

Social comparisons shape our identity irrespective of whether we are rich or poor, smart or dumb, tall or short: we compare ourselves with those around us and become conscious of how we differ and are treated. Deprivation is lack of a goal object people generally regard as attractive or desirable (Berkowitz, 1972). The deprived individual can become frustrated when he has been anticipating the pleasure to be derived from this object but, cannot fulfill this expectation. Frustration can in turn trigger or increase

aggressiveness or hostility especially when injustice is perceived (Myers, 1999). When this happens, there may be social unrest or violent actions, destruction or eventual disaster. For example, it has been observed that the circumstances surrounding oil exploration, exploitation and subsequent distillation of the benefits create problems and make people in oil producing communities (e.g the Niger Delta region) revolt and this is evident in some violent reactions that often take place within these communities (Ikporukpo (2003). This ought not to be if the national or state governments take appropriate steps to objectively monitor and address the situation by taking cognizance of contribution vis-à-vis benefit. Violence is one of the most destructive forces in the life of a nation. It could hinder the pace of human and national development through its impact on security, businesses, careers and other daily activities of individuals and groups who live and work in areas affected by it. The implication of these is that the overall wellbeing of the people is threatened. This is because prolonged stress in constant crisis situation as in the case of the Niger Delta may negatively impact on wellbeing and this is often overlooked.

Stress could be defined as an interaction between an individual and his/her environment; it is an organism's reaction to adverse stimulation. The Response-based perspective highlights the alarm reaction stage in which the body defends itself against adverse circumstances by activating the sympathetic nervous system which results in an adaptive short-term response to emergency situations. The resistance stage is a situation in which the individual does not indicate stress (Selyes, 1956). In experience however, he does not function well and may sometimes become ill. The exhaustion stage depicts a situation in which these adaptation resources are exhausted and this leads to breakdown as in the case of depression. For example, life changes and strain can be major sources of stress particularly if the changes are negative and they force people to adjust (Cohen and Williamson, 1991).

The Stimulus based perspective takes cognizance of the individual's interpretation of a stressful situation. This underscores the characteristics of the stressors, which have significantly tapped on the coping resources of the individual and trigger a stress response. The Cognition - Transactional Process emphasizes the relationship between antecedents, which are person variables, environmental variables and mediating processes which are

appraisals and coping of demands and resources. All these imply that the appraisal and emotional perception of the situation and successful adjustment could be influenced by factors such as gender, locus control of the individual experiencing stress, and probably the duration of exposure to the stressful situation.

According to the Cognition Transactional Process Perception, cognition appraisals comprise of two processes; namely the demand and resource (Lazarus, 19991). The demand appraisal refers to the appraisal of a situation as challenging when it mobilizes physical and mental activity and involvement. A situation may be seen as challenging for an individual when he has the opportunity to prove himself, anticipate gain, mastery and personal growth from the circumstance. The situation is seen as threatening when the individual foresees danger, expects physical injury and reduction in self esteem and personal identity.

Resource appraisal is the ability and options of the individual in handling the demands at hand. This enables the individual to evaluate his/her competence, and other resources that can help him readjust to the environment. For example, more insight into the understanding of stress has been provided by highlighting the roles of both internal and external resources in alleviating stress (Robbins, 1998). Thus, individuals experience stress when individual's resources are threatened with loss and failure to generate resources. Change in resources and lack of resources induce some level of stress in people. Furthermore, it was found that internals and externals differ in their response to stress. When internal and external confronts similar situations, internals believe they can have significant effects on the results while externals are more likely to be passive and defensive; as a result they are more prone to stress (Robbins, 1998). In relation to the workplace, internals believe that situations are under their control and they take responsibility for their actions. Unlike externals, internals search more actively for information before making a decision and are motivated to achieve and make greater attempts to control their environment. This implies that the less control people have over their situation the greater the impact of stressors. However, social support can buffer the impact of stress (Manning et al, 1996). Meaningful social relationships help people do a better job of handling stress. Social networks evolve from sources such as cultural norms, social institutions, companies, groups and individuals (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2001). Support could come in these various forms: esteem, informational, social and instrumental. Involvement with family, friends and community can provide support

especially for those with high social needs which can make stressors tolerable. While global social support encompasses all the four forms mentioned above, functional socials support buffers the effect of stressors in specific situations (Robbins, 1998). In addition, studies have shown that the ability to withstand stress depends on one's gender. Findings revealed that while men have been found to be able to cope positively with pressure, women have been found to show unwillingness to take risks and inability to cope under pressure (Davidson and Cooper, 1985).

The aforementioned issues have been highlighted in laying the background for this study. It is important to note that the incessant crises in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria (which is the Oil producing area) have become nightmares for residents in the region. This area comprises of Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Imo, Abia, Cross Rivers and Ondo which were regrouped into the following ethnic groups: Ijaws (which forms the majority group), the Urhobos, Itshekiris, Ukwanis, Ibibios, Ogonis and the Isokos. The Niger Delta region is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, crude oil from this area gives Nigeria about 20million US dollars a day and petroleum makes about 80% of government's annual revenue. However, oil derivation and other benefits accruing from oil have been perceived to be inequitably shared. The consequences are crises which are evident in the political, ethnic and communal conflicts that have undermined the enormous benefits accruing from oil production. The resultant high degree of instability has adverse social and psychological effect on members of those communities. It is imperative to find out the influence of psychosocial variables such as locus of control and social support on residents' perception of stressful situation. It is also interesting to find out if gender differences exist in the experience and report of stressful situation. Finally, does prolong experience of stress in terms of duration in crisis situation influence perception of stress in such an environment?

This study becomes necessary because most studies on the Niger Delta region focus on the ecological, economic and political aspects of the recurrent instability thereby neglecting the personal and psychological dimension of the problem. It is important to empirically document the experiences of people during and in the aftermath of crises by highlighting the importance of personality and social factors in alleviating their impact thereby facilitating adjustment.

Methods

Participants in this study were two hundred residents of Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria. Of these, one hundred and thirty-nine (69.5%) are males, while sixty-one (30.5%) are females. (The sample size is small because it was difficult conducting a study like this in such an environment and secondly, the disparity in male/female percentage is notable because most of the women were reluctant to make themselves available for data collection because the prevailing cultural practice in most local communities does not encourage women giving out information in place of the men to "outsiders"). The mean age is 39.68 and age range is between 24 and 67. One hundred and fifteen (57.5%) of the subjects are married, sixty-four (32.0%) are single, fifteen (7.5%) are separated and six (3%) are divorced. An analysis of educational qualification revealed that thirty-two (32%) of the respondents have high school certificates while the remaining have lower school certificates.

Accidental sampling procedure was adopted because of the volatile nature of the environment which made other sampling techniques inappropriate. A structured questionnaire was used to collect information from the study participants. Demographic section of the questionnaire requested from the participants their age, sex, education, ethnic group, marital status and length of stay in the community. Stressful life event scale was administered to the respondents. The items were scored on a five point Likert format. The reliability coefficient for the scale is .90 with item total correlation ranging from .42 to .78. A Locus of control scale was used to assess respondents' explanation for the events that shape their life.[1] The scale yielded a reliability coefficient of .91 and item total correlation ranging from .62 to .82. The Social Support Scale was used to determine the level of support received by the respondents from significant others around them.[2] It has a coefficient alpha of .77 and item-total correlation range from .37 to .55.

Results

The findings of the study showed a significant influence of locus of control on perceived stressful life event (t (198) = 5.08 p < .05). Specifically, subjects with external locus of control scored higher on perceived stressful life event (Mean = 65.98) than those with internal locus of control (Mean = 62.39). In the same vein, those with social support scored lower

than those without social support network on perceived stressful life event. A significant difference was found between males and females on perceived stressful life event (t (198) = 4.01 p < .05). Female subjects scored higher (Mean = 65.45) on stressful life events than male subjects (Mean = 63.78) .In addition, length of stay in the community influenced perceived stressful life event (t (198, 2) 3.201 P<.05). Specifically, respondents who had stayed longer in the community perceived more stress (Mean = 67.53) than those who had stayed for a shorter time (Mean = 61.00).

Discussion, Conclusion and Implication

This study examined the influence of personal and social variables on the perception of stressful live event. The study was conducted among individuals who reside in areas prone to sudden unrest and crisis as a result of political, social and economic instability. The findings of the study indicated that locus of control is a significant variable in the perception of a stressful situation. Specifically, it revealed that there was a significant difference between externals and internals in perception of the crisis as stressful. Subjects with internal locus of control scored lower on perceived stress than subjects with external locus of control. This result confirmed the findings of other studies which indicated that perceived control undermines the impact of stress. For example, some research findings showed that personality variables positively influence the way individuals perceive or react to stress (Chovwen et al, 2004) , and stressful events in the workplace (Brockner, 1998). The probable explanation for the present finding may be that residents with internal locus of control believe in their ability to exercise control over events and happening around them. Subsequently, this positive appraisal plays a significant role in their perception of their situation as not inducing stress. This implies that individuals with internal locus of control may better adjust and get over their traumatic experience than those who are externals.

 Being confident and having an understanding that a situation is under one's control enhance coping ability and adjustment despite the loss and damage people may suffer during crisis. This makes life meaningful and people hopeful. This disposition would facilitate the healing process that is often embarked upon after religious, ethnic and national crises. In rehabilitation and intervention programs, locus of control can be developed in order to restore dignity and hope and improve destiny in the face of loss for victims of violence and conflict. For example, during post conflict reconstruction involving psychosocial intervention programs, locus of control is a personality variable that may facilitate adjustment of victims.

Secondly, it was found that those with social support appraised their situation more positively than those without social support. This is in line with the view that social support is an important factor in moderating the effect of stress. Previous studies have indicated that support network is crucial in social change adaptation and adjustment to stressful life situations (Kitson, Moir and Mason, 1982; Asagba and Okechukwu, 2000). Involvement with family, friends and community can provide support especially for those with high social needs and this makes stressors tolerable. Social support is a viable networking tool which is gradually losing its uniqueness and importance in most societies. In contemporary times, people get less involved in burden sharing and other forms of interactions. Specifically, in conflict situations, informational and instrumental supports are essential ingredient in resettlement programs. Informational support involves providing help in defining, understanding and coping with problems while instrumental support involves provision of financial aids, material resources and other needed services (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2001). In addition, recreational activities that allow for close social interaction should be encouraged. Tracing service should be established to reunite people and families in cases of displacement.

Further result revealed a significant difference between males and females in their appraisal of stressful life events. Female respondents scored higher on stressful life events measure than male respondents. This finding is corroborated by a previous study which reported that women who experienced stressful life events, such as death in the family or personal illness, appraised these events more negatively than did their male counterparts (Hojat et al, 1999) Similarly, another study of men and women Israeli soldiers reported that women's assessment of stress as well as stress experience were higher than that of men (Bar-Tal et al, 1994) . The reason for this may be that women experience more stress in some situation than men and as a result are not able to withstand as much pressure as males. The impact of this is often evident in situations where women double as victims and as burden bearers by taking care of others in conflict and crisis situations. During war and insecurity women are more affected owing to their low status in the society (Kameri, 2004). Efforts should be made to protect and support victims of violence especially women in order alleviate their suffering. Additionally, women should be consulted and encouraged to actively participate in programs and decision making processes that address their concerns especially in conflict situations.

Finally, it was found that those who have stayed in this region for a period of more than five years had a negative appraisal of their situation than those who had stayed for a shorter period. Many individuals such as executives working long hours and some medics who had been deprived of sleep reported that they experience stress and as a result the quality of their work suffered (Arnold et el, 1995). Research has shown that people who undergo highly stressful experiences become more vulnerable to disease; sustained stress suppresses the immune system leaving people vulnerable to diseases (Cohen and Williamson, 1991).

Conclusively, the importance of socio-psychological factors influencing the perception of stress experienced during crisis cannot be overemphasized as this call for a serious reflection on human condition and action toward the creation of a new regimen of existence and enhancement of human potential. Governments, nongovernmental organizations and civil organization should be aware that much cannot be achieved in post conflict resettlement and healing process if the relevance of psychosocial variables is undermined. Many displaced individuals and families with feelings of despair and helplessness can be assisted to live normal lives during rehabilitation programs by focusing on salient psychosocial factors. It is a strong and vibrant people that make a vibrant society and nation. Individuals need to be de-marginalised and meaning must be given to their lives. Pride in our ethnic heritage need not displace our larger communal or national identity. Subgroup identity and social cohesion can coexist. Preoccupation with diversity may counter the universalism that is basic to a nonviolent conflict resolution strategy. (Mayton et al; 1996)

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