


Black South Africans' Perceptions of Psychotherapy and Counseling

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health poses a public health concern in South Africa. The country is ranked among the worst countries in terms of mental health, according to Sapien Labs' Second Annual Mental State of the World Report, which was based on 223,000 responses across 34 countries (Employee Assistance Professionals Association of South Africa [EAPA-SA], 2023). Similarly, the World Health Organization [WHO] (2024), has reported that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19-year-olds, and South Africa had the ninth highest suicide rate in the world at 23.5 per 100,000. Within the same context, in a 2022 study by the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), it was found that 25.7% of South Africans were depressed, with only a quarter seeking help (WITS, 2022). Comparably, recent statistics on mental health issues in South Africa are concerning, having reached alarming levels (WITS, 2022). One example is the report by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group [SADAG] (2021), revealing that South Africa witnesses 23 suicide cases per day, with 10 suicide attempts for every successful one. The report emphasized that the organization used to receive 600 calls daily before the onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2019, but as of September 2021, that number had risen by almost 47.75% to 2,200 calls per day. These statistics raise concern considering South

Africa's placement as one of the last four countries on the global list of mental health treatment providers. Nevertheless, research has shed light on the factors influencing this ranking, particularly within the Black South African communities. The factors include inter alia discrimination, cultural ideologies, affordability, stigma, and mental health attitudes (Lund et al., 2011; South African Medical and Education Foundation [SAME Foundation], 2022).

While the afore-mentioned statistics are alarming, it is crucial to bear in mind the unique historical context of South Africa and understand that the prevalence of mental health problems in the country are influenced by an interplay of sociopolitical, economic, historical, and cultural factors, largely due to the country's past under the Apartheid regime. The Apartheid era inflicted immense suffering on South Africans, particularly Black South Africans, through segregation, oppression, hate, death, racism, discrimination, prejudice, and loss (Futshane, 2021). The ripple effects are still evident to date, as Black South Africans continue to suffer from poverty, economic inequality, academic disparities, systematic racial discrimination, and social divisions (Francis & Webster, 2019).

Despite its multiculturalism, South Africa faces disparities in mental health challenges and help-seeking behavior, as indicated by research. For example, in the study by Harriman et al. (2021), it was found that Black Africans were more than twice as likely to experience psychological distress compared to other racial groups. Similar findings were reported by Jackson et al. (2010), who also emphasized the role of access to socioeconomic resources in understanding mental health disparities. The authors maintain that the ongoing impoverishment of many South Africans, particularly Blacks, is to be expected due to the lasting impact of Apartheid and their difficulty in matching the resources available to their White counterparts. The sluggish economy of recent years has also exacerbated the susceptibility to mental health challenges among Black South Africans through worsening unemployment and financial constraints, intensifying socioeconomic disparities (World Bank Group [WBG], 2024).

The provided background indicates that South Africans, particularly Black South Africans, face numerous challenges that necessitate effective strategies to ensure their well-being (Gumede, 2021; Harriman et al., 2021; Lawal, 2024; Mngoma & Ayonrinde, 2023). One of the most feasible methods is psychotherapy and/or counseling. Psychotherapy refers to "a method of treatment that uses a variety of skills based on theoretical knowledge to help the patient, his/her well-being and mental health" (Pawlak & Kacprzyk-Straszak, 2020, p. 19). Comparably, counseling is a process in which clients learn to make better decisions and formulate new ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking (Omolayo & Osagu, 2013). Counseling and psychotherapy are two concepts often viewed as the same. Research has established that most Black South Africans are more familiar with the term "counseling" than "psychotherapy" (Bantjes et al., 2016). Therefore, they were used interchangeably for inclusivity in this research.

Mental health advocacy and research indicated that there is poor utilization of psychotherapy and/or counseling services, especially among Black people in rural areas and Black dominated townships. However, there is high utilization of traditional healers' services. Eighty percent (80%) of Black South Africans consult traditional healers primarily for mental health-related difficulties (Mendu & Ross, 2019; Shange & Ross, 2022). Thus, this study aimed to untangle this discrepancy by exploring the perceptions of psychotherapy and/or counseling for a more nuanced understanding as its usage is low among Black South Africans. This can bring forth insights that can help guide policies and legislation, psychotherapy and/or counseling awareness campaigns, evidence-based recommendations and targeted interventions.

Overarching Research Question

What are the perceptions of psychotherapy and/or counseling among Black South Africans in the Soweto township, Gauteng Province, South Africa?

Study Aim

The primary aim of the study was to explore the perceptions of psychotherapy and/or counseling among Black South Africans in Soweto, Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were formulated to achieve the study's aim: 1) To ascertain the level of understanding Black South Africans have regarding psychotherapy and/or counseling, 2) To explore Black South Africans' perceptions of psychotherapy and/or counseling.

METHODS

Design

This qualitative study was grounded in social constructivism and a phenomenological design. Social constructivism aided researchers in understanding reality from the participants' viewpoint, as it assumes that reality is not static but rather fluid and socially constructed (Tenny et al., 2022). Furthermore, by employing a qualitative approach, the researchers were able to delve into how participants construct knowledge by comprehending their distinct viewpoints and the significance they attribute to these viewpoints and subsequently use this knowledge to interpret their experiences and reality (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The phenomenological design allowed researchers to understand the perceptions of Black South Africans based on their views and experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Soweto township, located in the Gauteng province of South Africa, within the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. The researchers targeted this region for its high population density of Black South Africans from diverse ethnic backgrounds, presenting an opportunity to gain valuable insights into perceptions of counseling and/or psychotherapy.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population for this study were Black South Africans living in the Soweto township, Gauteng Province, South Africa. The sample was selected using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling, also known as deliberate sampling, is a technique used to select participants who possess knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Bhardwaj, 2019; Palinkas et al., 2015). To be included in the study, participants had to meet specific criteria: willing to participate, aged 18 and above, able to provide consent, be a Black South African residing in Soweto township, and possess sufficient proficiency in the English language. Minors, individuals unable to give consent, those unwilling to participate, and Black South Africans from other townships were excluded. We determined the sample size by following the principle of data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the data generation process stops due to the absence of new information (Saunders et al., 2018). In this study, saturation was reached at the 18th participant.

Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting individual face-to-face interviews, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The schedule consisted of open-ended questions that were created, pretested and refined by the researchers before being used with actual participants. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to gain insight into participants' perceptions of psychotherapy and/or counseling. This method allowed for a deepened conversation when needed, while remaining grounded and focused. Participants were asked pre-determined questions. The interviews lasted for approximately 30 to 40 minutes each. With the participants' consent, each session was recorded for transcription purposes.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis [TA] (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. Initially, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading, highlighting and noting ideas and initial patterns. The data was also sent to an independent co-coder for concurrent coding during this stage. Next, the researchers created initial codes that corresponded to relevant extracts. Once the data was encoded, the researcher arranged it systematically and began identifying themes. Once this was complete, the researchers proceeded to examine each theme in detail. After studying and reviewing the themes, the researchers proceeded to define and label them. During this stage, the researchers connected with the independent co-coder, engaging in a robust discussion and comparison of the themes they each generated independently. The researchers and co-coder determined the final themes after they reached consensus. This resulted in the production of a comprehensive, cohesive, informative, and non-repetitive report that accurately represents the participants' opinions.

Trustworthiness/Rigor

The study followed four canons to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Nowell et al., 2017). The latter was ensured through various strategies, including the use of relevant methods, member checking, audit trail, prolonged engagement, thick descriptions, peer review, field notes, bracketing and reflexivity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (CREC), reference number 10691316_CRECHS_2024. Ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and informed consent were respected in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Demographic Details of Participants

A total of 18 participants were part of the research sample. The participants were all Black South Africans from the Soweto township in Gauteng province, South Africa. The gender representation was equal, with nine females (50%) and nine males (50%). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 76 years, making them a valuable source of information to analyze the phenomenon across different generations. Out of all participants, two left school before completing matric, eight completed Grade 12 successfully, and the other eight held a combination of higher qualifications, including diplomas, college certificates and degrees. Out of the group, five participants had prior experience with counseling and/or psychotherapy as they consulted a counselor/psychotherapist before, while 13 had not. Twelve people mentioned being acquainted with someone who has sought counseling and/or psychotherapy, whereas six individuals did not know of anyone who has attended counseling and/or psychotherapy. None of the participants were in the helping profession. Kindly refer to the table below for the participants' demographic details.

Table 1. Demographic Details of the Participants (n=18)

Participant	Age	Gender	Home Language	Highest Qualification
1	65	Male	SeSotho	Matric
2	34	Female	SeTswana	Diploma
3	41	Male	IsiZulu	Higher Certificate
4	42	Female	SeTswana	Higher Certificate
5	19	Female	IsiZulu	Matric
6	21	Female	SeSotho	Matric
7	53	Female	IsiZulu	Grade 11
8	25	Male	IsiNdebele	Degree
9	33	Male	IsiZulu	Matric
10	23	Male	IsiZulu	Matric
11	32	Female	IsiXhosa	Diploma
12	32	Male	IsiZulu	Matric
13	18	Female	SeSotho	Matric
14	43	Male	SeTswana	Diploma
15	33	Female	IsiZulu	Matric
16	76	Female	SeTswana	Grade 10
17	43	Male	SeSotho	Diploma
18	32	Male	SeTswana	Diploma

The themes and subthemes in this section emerged from the data analysis process. Verbatim participant responses are used to support the presented themes and subthemes, maintaining the rawness of the data and giving the reader an authentic feel of how the participants expressed themselves. Grammatical errors are therefore present in some of the excerpts. To maintain the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are employed instead of their actual names. The participants are identified as participant 1, 2, 3, and so forth.

Table 2. Emergent Themes and Subthemes

Main themes	Subtheme
Theme 1: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is problem solving and emotional release.	
Theme 2: Counseling and psychotherapy are Western concepts.	Subtheme 2.1: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is neither essential nor the primary resource for help. Subtheme 2.2: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is a luxury, inaccessible and expensive.
Theme3: Accessing counseling/psychotherapy services is associated with stigmas.	
Theme 4: Counseling and/or psychotherapy violates cultural values.	
Theme 5: Counseling and/or psychotherapy has benefits.	Subtheme 5.1: Openness is needed to undergo counseling. Subtheme 5.2: Counseling and/or psychotherapy can be used to solve and improve socio-economic issues.
Theme 6: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is recommended for men.	

Theme 1: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is problem-solving and emotional release

This theme originated from the descriptions provided by participants, particularly those with prior experience of counseling and/or psychotherapy or who knew someone who had. Both “counseling” and “psychotherapy” were used in data collection. However, the participants exhibited a greater acceptance of the term “counseling” and provided their responses using this term. Regardless, the participants had a reasonable knowledge of what the practice involves. The recurring theme in the participants’ responses was that counseling is primarily seen as a space for emotional relief. The following verbatim quotes from participants’ responses support this claim.

A place where you realize what’s bothering you. I don’t know any other word but the Zulu word “Ukubhodla” (the act of taking out everything that is inside you). That’s the only easy way I can say, or I can put this in. A place where you release your traumas or whatever the case may be. (Participant 9, male, 33 years)

Counseling is like taking out what’s inside that whatever you’re feeling, taking it outside to someone else and what I can say is that you disclose what you have inside to someone else and hear his opinion and stuff.” (Participant 3, male, 41 years)

I’d say it’s basically talking to like a friend but not a friend about your problems trying to understand mental health as a whole and you know, whatever you have, not necessarily just problems, but basically your solutions if you need help mentally. It’s like a doctor, but, you know, like your mental doctor.” (Participant 6, female, 21 years)

If you do have a problem or something you want to talk about, you can’t talk to your family or someone else like you can talk to a stranger that’s like counseling. So, you can tell them how you feel and what is going on with you” (Participant 7, female, 53 years)

Partly, I mean, counseling is for people who need help with understanding their emotions. We need people who are going to help us understand our emotions, see or help us see the need to heal from things that are setting us back from doing certain things, but it’s also for people who would love to talk to someone if they don’t have that opportunity or it’s also for someone who is well but just wants to manage their emotions and feelings well. (Participant 12, male, 32 years)

I think it’s some sort of a sacred space where you feel comfortable that let me tell the person how you’re feeling and how this thing is worrying me. I think it’s disclosing what is bothering you to another person. I think you trust that person enough and maybe you don’t know the person because usually counsellors you don’t know them. So, you’re there to tell them how you feeling because you need help on how to be assisted with whatever is bothering you. (Participant 13, female, 18 years)

You know what, maybe your mother or your father passed away and you find that you mourn a lot, and you become worried. So, you have to get somebody who is the counselor who’s counseling to show you and relieve you, so you calm down. They will tell you how to calm down and encourage you and you’ll be relieved. (Participant 16, female, 76 years)

Theme 2: Counseling and psychotherapy are Western concepts

Despite having a reasonable understanding of counseling and/or psychotherapy, participants perceive it as Western and not to be taken seriously, as not much is known about it. Consequently, it is believed that seeking such help will result in little to no relief. The following verbatim responses effectively capture the participants' expressions and perspectives comprehensively.

They don't know much about it because it's something that's not there in our community. We were never exposed to that thing. It's foreign, it's like "What is counseling?" "For what?" "What is your problem?" (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

I think our surrounding here is a little bit old-fashioned. They are aware of it but those are things they actually don't consider because they don't take them seriously because they don't understand. Maybe they could understand what it's all about if they can get a bit of assistance. (Participant 1, male, 65 year)

It's like for us counseling is like you're talking a foreign language. For us we don't understand counseling because we've never even been to counseling even your neighbor and the people around you, nobody has been to counseling, so for us Blacks we've never been exposed to it. (Participant 3, male, 41 years)

I don't think they believe in mental health, so it can never be a thing for them to go for counseling because they don't believe depression is a real thing. They don't believe anxiety is a real thing, so for them doing counseling is like why am I doing that? (Participant 6, female, 21 years)

Subtheme 2.1: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is neither essential nor the primary resource for help

Despite being familiar with counseling and/or psychotherapy, some participants expressed that it is not essential or something commonly discussed in Black families and communities. Traditionally, it is not considered the first option for seeking help when families face challenges. When everything else has been tried and failed, counseling and/or psychotherapy is typically seen as the last alternative. This is captured in the following verbatim extracts from the participants' responses.

I think the people around me don't really see it as like a necessity. Yeah, they like kind of shy away from it, so it's not like the first preference or the first point of contact in terms of like getting help, it's always the last option or never even like to be spoken about or to be touched. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

They think that counseling is not our thing, and we never talk about counseling. You find out that you've been through a lot with your families, but none of my family members have attended counseling. (Participant 3, male, 41 year)

Black people have the perception that why do I have to go outside? Why do I have to talk about my issues if I can tolerate what I'm going through? (Participant 7, female, 53 year)

Some might say it's a waste of time. It's not gonna help you, that's how life is supposed to be, maybe when you're facing a situation. (Participant 13, female, 18 year)

Subtheme 2.2: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is a luxury, inaccessible and expensive

The viewpoint of certain participants was that counseling and/or psychotherapy is a luxury for the rich, despite recognizing the positive impact it can have. While most acknowledged its significance, some highlighted concerns about affordability. Generally, therapy is perceived as mostly reserved for rich, White individuals. The following responses from the participants provide an exact representation of the latter assertion.

Most of the people think that counseling is for Whites, counseling is for people who have money. (Participant 4, female, 42 year)

I would like to encourage that counseling becomes an available thing, maybe for Black people. I think it's because of the pricing also, not necessarily everyone can afford to go to counseling or therapy. If we make that more accessible for people, I think it will be a good start for them. To try and encourage more people to go for counseling and such things. From my experience with like your centres, it's that there's a shortage still. There could be one or two counsellors or Social Workers covering 3 areas. So, there's a major shortage on that end. (Participant 8, male, 25 years)

I think a lot of us don't have resources that have to do with counseling in hospitals, in schools and that's a disadvantage because really therapy is like for an hour, R500, 2 hours, one thousand rands, you cannot be able to afford that on a yearly basis. So, it's kind of a disadvantage that we cannot get places or resources that would help us be able to go to counseling. I don't really know what I would say to people to reach out, but what I can say is that we really need counseling spaces within our communities and our schools. (Participant 12, male, 32 years)

Theme 3: Accessing counseling/psychotherapy services is associated with stigmas

This theme emerged from the participants' reluctance to discuss their intense personal struggles. As they find it difficult to share such things even with those close to them, concerns are raised about their ability to confide in therapists. The latter choice appears to be influenced by fear of judgement and ridicule based on personal experiences, as some participants alluded that they once shared their difficulties with others, only to have their confidentiality violated whereby they were judged and became the subject of ridicule within the community. The following direct quotes from the participants' answers hint at this.

Yeah, it is very difficult because some people will talk about your situation or your problem and then you will be like a laughingstock. When you are apart from them and then they will tell others and, for example, they will talk about your husband doing things and you know in our society, even if you don't tell the people they will just speculate that the husband just got home now in the morning; the husband is drinking, the husband they've got girlfriends, so those things are painful. (Participant 4, female, 42 years)

Sometimes it seems as if people bottle things up and they don't wanna talk. And there are afraid that if they share it with somebody, their deepest, darkest thoughts, somebody would look at you and judge you. Some people are very reluctant to participate in such things because they're afraid, just like confiding in friends. For example, if they can't confide in their own friends, tell them I've got problems because your friends going to tell other people. (Participant 14, male, 43 years)

Theme 4: Counseling and/or psychotherapy violates cultural values

This theme emerged from participants' expressions highlighting how African culture values and encourages silence, avoidance and sugarcoating of difficulties. Hence, opting for counseling and/or psychotherapy would amount to a violation of these cultural values. The excerpts included below from the participants' responses confirm the latter claim.

For me, it is because we are Africans. We like to put things under the rug. We don't like to confront the deep issues that we have and as families...we don't want to confront the issues that we have. So, we would rather put it under the rug and be like "Ai uyamazi unjani" (You know how this person is). So, we always try to sugarcoat things or not face the actual problem. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

It's the vulnerability part, because when you're there, you're sitting with a stranger, and you have to open up and touch areas and memories that will make you vulnerable and seemingly appear weak. Weak and men that's something that doesn't go together. You know we are, we are socialised to be protectors, so when you go against that grain, we as guys go like "what's wrong with that guy". (Participant 18, male, 32 years)

Theme 5: Counseling and/or psychotherapy has benefits

Although most participants were skeptical about counseling and/or psychotherapy during data collection, their views differed when asked about recommending it to others. It was surprising to hear their answers, as they expressed approval for individuals seeking counseling and/or psychotherapy, acknowledging its potential positive impact. The statements below depict the participants' expressions and/or perspectives.

I think it's awesome. I think more people should go to counseling and more people should just go to counseling. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

I think it's meant for everybody. You have those problems; you can end up having a mental breakdown due to problems that you are having be it financially." (Participant 3, male, 41 years)

I think it's good personally, because I used to struggle with anxiety, so it's very good to have someone that you talk to, you know, sometimes it's good to have someone that you talk to that you don't know personally because then their views are not going to be subjective to you. Their views are going to be broad, and they've studied it." (Participant 6, female, 21 years)

I think counseling should be for everyone. I think everyone has problems. So, I think having you know that platform to actually try and find a solution to your problems should be something that's like a basic need for everyone, I think. It shouldn't be just limited to a certain group [white people]. (Participant 8, male, 25 years)

It's a good thing, something that helps people. (Participant 11, Female, 32 years)

Subtheme 5.1: Openness is needed to undergo counseling

This subtheme emerged from the participants' responses to the question, "If you were afforded the opportunity to undergo psychotherapy and/or counseling, what would you do?" The overwhelming majority expressed their enthusiasm to attend. Despite some participants stating

their lack of prior counseling and/or psychotherapy experience and not knowing anyone who has attended, this was still expressed. The following direct quotes illustrate the inconsistency found in the participants' perspectives.

Definitely. I would love that. I think I would take it because I'm the kind of person that always wants to be operating at my highest self, at my best like I want to be always in a higher self of where I am and recognizing how great I am. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

For the fact that it assists with solutions to what someone is going through. So, I definitely would go at all costs. (Participant 1, male, 65 years)

Yeah. I would. So, I can say counseling is good. Yeah. So that I can confess because I've been through a lot since I'm saying because even now my father was not a part of my life, there are things that I've been through, you know, the things that I went through that I wanted or need help with. I want maybe if I could be given a chance, talk to someone and express my feelings and stuff. I would love that. (Participant 3, male, 41 years)

If I could be given an opportunity to go to counseling, I will do that so that I can express myself and maybe I would find myself and everything that is hidden in me then maybe have closure. (Participant 4, female, 42 years)

I think counseling is a good thing for the most part and I would definitely do it. (Participant 5, female, 19 years)

I would because I've got things that I wanna clear out, but I'm very particular with the kind of person that I need. So, I wouldn't just go for counseling if it's just anybody, I need to 1st get to know the person understand if we have the same views and you know I mean at the end of the day you don't wanna see someone that makes you feel crazy about your own problems or you're wrong when you know you're not. (Participant 6, female, 21 years)

Yeah, I would. Like I said, it would be best for you to talk to someone outside not someone who knows how I live and what I've been through. (Participant 7, female, 53 years)

Yeah, I would take it because I can't solve my own problems on my own so I think counseling might help. (Participant 11, female, 32 years)

Yes. I would go because that's a first step to healing. (Participant 13, female, 18 years)

Yeah, I would take it. Because there's something that I can't talk about to my partner, to my mom, my sister. But I should be able to talk about it to a counsellor. (Participant 15, female, 33 years)

I would go. She's going to resolve my problem. She's going to help me and alleviate my load. I've been sitting with this stress and having palpitations and now this person came and told me if you like this how you must solve this problem. (Participant 16, female, 76 years)

I would go to try and figure out from my side being the person who wants to understand more of the approaches. What are they using? And there are books that I have read and other people that I speak to. (Participant 17, male, 43 years)

I would go, I work in a really stressful environment, I work with news so I would take the opportunity to go and debrief and I try and travel as I don't go for counseling as I travel around the country. (Participant 18, male, 32 years)

Subtheme 5.2: Counseling and/or psychotherapy can be used to solve and improve socio-economic issues

The idea that counseling and/or psychotherapy could assist with socio-economic problems was raised by a few participants. Highlighting this subtheme is important as South Africa grapples with a multitude of social problems, such as a high suicide rate, alcohol abuse, poverty, crime, assaults, and Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF). These issues have resulted in mental health challenges, including PTSD, fear, anger, and hate. Below is an excerpt from one of the participants' responses that directly backs up the latter claim.

A lot of things like issues of gender-based violence, like rape. I'm not saying it's like these issues are not gonna be there, but all of these societal issues that we have, I think they might be decreased if people were to attend counseling and speak about the things that bother them. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

Theme 6: Counseling and/or psychotherapy is recommended for men

While some participants believed counseling and/or psychotherapy can be beneficial for all, a few specifically emphasized the importance of men seeking these services. The following extracts accurately reflect the participants' responses and capture this.

I think more men should go for counseling and therapy. It's great man. Because I think, I don't know if it's a stigma or just like our perception that points out that men don't like to talk. They'd rather like deal with their problems and not like talk. I think it would be like a great platform for them and maybe, but also another man should like counsell them, not like a female. I don't know, I'm just thinking. Yeah, to have someone less emotional to listen and understand. So, I think men don't want to talk about a lot of things. (Participant 2, female, 34 years)

Men need help particularly amongst ourselves as Black men, it's not often that you find guys actually talking about such thing. I think it's just something that we pick up socially as we socialize. We men tend to bottle up our emotions, you build walls around you as you grow. We are out there in the streets, we do everything, we provide for our families, we provide for our wives, our kids so we go through a lot. So, it's not easy for us to be vulnerable and open. It's possible but it's not easy, not a lot of guys are able to do that. I think it's how we are socialized growing up, I think our testosterone has to do with it as well, some genetic biological factor. (Participant 18, male, 32 years)

Discussion

The study found that participants demonstrated a reasonable comprehension of the practice of counseling and/or psychotherapy. The participants emphasized that counseling and/or psychotherapy provides individuals with a private space to explore their problems, comprehend their emotions, find relief, seek mental health solutions, mourn and/or grief loss of their loved ones and freely express themselves – something they would otherwise not do with family members and friends. The participants' responses highlighted that the core purpose of counseling and/or psychotherapy is to provide emotional relief. Omolayo and Osagu (2013) confirm that counseling aids in the development of better decision-making and behavioral strategies.

The participants held both positive and negative views about the practice of psychotherapy and/or counseling. The negative perceptions were multifold. At first, counseling and/or psychotherapy were neither regarded as essential nor the primary resource for help. Mashamaite (2015), Semanya and Potgieter (2014), and Shange and Ross (2022) all agree that traditional healers are the primary choice for nearly 80% of Black South Africans when it comes to seeking help for any kind of suffering, especially mental health challenges. However, it is worth mentioning that some studies have discovered that some Black South Africans seek the services of both traditional healers and mental health practitioners concurrently (Ross, 2007). In a similar vein, it was found that the utilization of traditional healers was connected to socioeconomic factors such as proximity, affordability, and ease of access (Chen, 2008; Mothibe & Sibanda, 2019). Comparably, seeking assistance from Western mental health professionals was seen as costly, making it unaffordable for many Black individuals (Olugbile et al., 2007).

Secondly, counseling and/or psychotherapy were viewed as a Western concept. That is, the practice was viewed as foreign and not in line with the "traditional way of doing things". The results of Ruane's (2010) study align with these findings, highlighting that counseling and/or psychotherapy was perceived as Western and foreign among Black individuals. The practice was also seen as not supportive of indigenous cultures, leading Black individuals to rely on traditional healers for mental health problems. Additionally, the study found that counseling and/or psychotherapy were viewed as a luxury only for the wealthy, making it inaccessible and costly. Bantjes et al. (2016) found evidence that aligns with this assertion, showing that counseling was considered a luxury and not accessible to Black individuals. The researchers argue that this perspective is both disadvantageous and misinformed, and it is essential to dispel.

Within the same context, the disapproval of counseling and/or psychotherapy also stems from the expectation that sensitive topics that are typically not spoken of in Black communities will have to be openly discussed during the consultations. This may be considered inconsistent with cultural norms as Black culture encourages silence, avoidance, privacy, stoicism and sugarcoating of matters using proverbs such as "*Ai uyamazi unjani*" (You know how this person is) and "*monna ke nku o llela teng*" (a man is a sheep, he cries from within) (Luthada & Netshandama, 2019). Consequently, seeking counseling and/or psychotherapy may be seen as contradicting or violating these deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. This is particularly relevant, especially when considering males who are encouraged to embrace stoicism, a concept closely tied to the Western notion of hegemonic masculinity as coined by Connell (2005). Therefore, men are likely to avoid seeking psychotherapy or counseling since they believe the vulnerability required may result in them being labeled as "weak" and judged negatively, a risk they may deem unworthy.

Along similar lines, the research also discovered that certain participants, particularly males, had a pessimistic perception of psychotherapy and/or counseling because they would have to disclose their deep-rooted or seated struggles, particularly to a stranger, something that goes against their cultural ethos. Participants expressed reservations about opening up as they also struggle to open up, even to those close to them, due to the likelihood of their issues being shared. Therefore, there is a fear that this could cause them to be a laughingstock in the community. As such, the potential humiliation that may follow makes undergoing counseling and/or psychotherapy not worthwhile. Considering this situation, the practice is not deemed favorable.

In contrast, even though the participants held a negative view of counseling and/or psychotherapy, they also had numerous positive perceptions. Firstly, when asked if they would recommend counseling and/or psychotherapy to someone else, surprisingly, they expressed willingness to do so as they believe it has positive effects. These positive perspectives are praiseworthy and can serve as groundwork for targeted interventions and awareness campaigns in the future. It is also admirable that some participants are actively endorsing counseling and/or psychotherapy for those who are interested, signaling progress in the right direction. Likewise, the

participants were questioned about their willingness to attend therapy if given the opportunity, and a vast majority expressed their interest, even those without any previous consultations with counselors and/or psychotherapists and without knowing of others who had attended. The researchers contend that the responses above not only demonstrate the willingness to participate in the practice but also imply that some participants may have unresolved issues they wish to express but have never had the chance to do so. Once again, this is a positive step forward as the participants are open to giving it a try.

Surprisingly, participants also called for the promotion of counseling and/or psychotherapy for men, emphasizing its potential benefits. The researchers contend that this could be partly influenced by the high levels of GBVF in South Africa, with men being the predominant offenders. This also suggests that the participants are mindful of important challenges facing the country. The participants emphasized that men can greatly benefit from counseling and/or psychotherapy due to their reluctance to discuss issues or challenges. Of note was also the participants' emphasis on the importance of men being counseled by male professionals, as they feel and believe that women counselors may struggle to listen due to being too emotional. One participant in particular emphasized that men can derive great value from counseling and/or psychotherapy because of the demanding responsibilities and societal role they are expected to fulfill.

While continuing a positive trajectory, a few participants recognized the potential for counseling and/or psychotherapy to aid in addressing and improving socio-economic issues. It is important to emphasize this theme because South Africa is facing numerous social problems that make individuals vulnerable to mental health issues like PTSD, depression and anxiety. Psychotherapy and/or counseling can play a role in helping combat these socio-economic challenges.

Limitations and further Research

Although the study has provided valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its numerous limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small, as is typical in qualitative studies. Thus, more extensive studies are necessary to validate the findings and track the evolution of Black South Africans' views on counseling and/or psychotherapy. Secondly, the study used purposive sampling to select the sample. As a recommendation, future studies should adopt probability sampling methods to increase the feasibility of generalizing the findings. The study was carried out in the Soweto township of Gauteng Province in South Africa, meaning that the results should be interpreted with consideration for this specific location. To broaden future studies, other densely populated townships with a Black population should be included. Furthermore, the study only considered participants who were comfortable with English as the medium of instruction, thus excluding others. As a result, upcoming studies should consider the option of participants utilizing their native language(s) for a more comprehensive perspective. Finally, since the study was qualitative, it is recommended that future studies incorporate a quantitative component or adopt a mixed methods approach.

Recommendations

South African academic institutions, especially those that train mental health practitioners, can benefit by being aware of and including the findings of this study in their training or curricula. Students will gain insight into the perception of psychotherapy and/or counseling among Black South Africans. This will also serve as preparation for their entry into professions, as they may be employed in Black-dominated communities and townships where such perceptions may be rife.

To foster a comprehensive understanding of African psychology and challenges faced by Black South Africans, academic institutions need to prioritize the integration of African paradigms into curricula development. By doing this, we can shift towards context-specific pedagogy that better

connects with the way Black people live, rather than solely focusing on the Western approach. Additionally, this will encourage research that attends to the needs of Black people, taking their viewpoint into account.

The current study's findings can serve as a starting point for mental health practitioners to grasp the perspectives of their Black clients on counseling and/or psychotherapy. The latter will enable mental health practitioners to support their Black clients effectively. Mental health professionals can also use the study findings to enhance their services for Black individuals. This can also help debunk negative misconceptions that Black people have about psychotherapy and/or counseling, making them feel understood and comfortable during consultations.

Promulgation or amendment of policies and legislation focusing on mental health targeting Black South Africans should consider the study results so that they are context-specific, sensitive and responsive to the needs and realities of Black people. It is imperative to engage in collaborative consultations to ensure policies and legislation align with the reality and struggles of Black people.

The outcomes of this study can be utilized to enhance awareness campaigns and targeted interventions in the area where the study was conducted. This will enable such interventions to target areas that require improvement and dispel or demystify misconceptions concerning counseling and/or psychotherapy. By paying attention to the latter, campaigns can be designed and/or tailored to be sensitive, relevant, context-specific and responsive to the needs of Black people in Soweto township.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated how Black South Africans in Soweto, Gauteng province, South Africa, perceive psychotherapy and/or counseling. The results revealed that the participants had a reasonable comprehension of the practice. Their perceptions of the practice were both negative and positive. This is an important development that indicates a shift in perception and can serve as a base for future research and targeted interventions.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

The study was initiated by SM, who was actively involved in all steps of data acquisition, analysis, authorship, and interpretation. DL contributed to data analysis, manuscript development, content review, and supervision of SM. Both SM and DL agree to the final version of this article.

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