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Social Capital: A mechanism to buffer Stress for Sustainability of Mental Health

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Abstract

The contemporary cosmopolitan society is fast-paced and self-absorbed. It is full of stress in various forms; physical, environmental, socio economic and psychological. The World Health Organization rightly declared that stress has become a worldwide epidemic that affects the physiology of the body. In extreme cases, stress could lead to disability, anxiety disorders, sexual dysfunction, depression and suicide. These complications of extreme stress have profound consequence on mental health, an important component of the Sustainable Development Goals. Hence, the need to address mechanisms for coping with stress. This medico- social discourse, focuses on social capital as a mechanism to buffer stress for sustainability of mental health. Social capital is conceptualized as the connections, networks and relationships among people. The discourse is hinged on the social capital and social network theories. It also elucidates the magnitude and impact of stress as well as social capital, a non-pharmacological mechanism to buffer stress. The discourse utilizes WHO mental health statistics (2023), Gallup Stress Statistics (2021/2022) and examines existing scholarly socio scientific research papers. The paper reechoes the value of human relationships and the African "Spirit of Ubuntu" in co-building a new eco social world that leaves no one behind. It recommends the enhancement of social capital through initiatives that fortifies solidarity and empathy. The paper elucidates Social Work as formal source of social capital. It also stresses the need to be cautious in the establishment of relationships, as social capital could be negatively utilized.

Key words: Social capital, Mechanism, Stress, Mental health, Sustainability
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Introduction

The contemporary society, which is demanding and fast paced, is loaded with a myriad of problems which might be quite stressful. It appears that stress has come to stay as an escapable part of modern life. WHO refers to stress, as "worldwide epidemic". Sources of stress could be from major life events such as divorce, bereavement or failed relationship, daily hassles and demands, exhausting workload or financial pressure. Medical research estimates that 95% of illness and disease is stress related, especially high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease (Porter, 2017)   The Association of Psychiatrists in Nigeria has expressed deep concern over

the growing rate of mental and stress related disorders among Nigerians with 60 million Nigerians suffering from mental illnesses (Obindo, 2022)

Stress affects every living creature: the powerful and the powerless. Stress is a cosmopolitan problem of modern-day life. The modern world is like a pressure cooker which may explode if the steam is not released in time. Stress and psychosocial hazards are everyday steam. The shadow of anxiety hangs over some people like a constant cloud, affecting all they do or think. Medical practitioners and clinical psychologists have conducted various researches on stress and its impact on mental health while various mechanisms for coping have been proffered. This discourse, which is from the perspective of a social worker, elucidates a different dimension and highlights a social mechanism for buffering stress and sustaining mental health: Social capital.

The paper examines the reality and magnitude of stress and its impact on the physiology of the body. . Impact of stress on mental health is discussed with reference to various researches. Various mechanisms for coping with stress are examined with special reference to social capital while highlighting its utility and limitations. The discourse is hinged on the Social capital and Social Network theories. Social support, which is the benefit of social capital, is examined by perusing related academic papers. Special reference is given to Social Work profession, being a formal source of social capital.The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World is examined with reference to the Philosophy of Ubuntu. Some suggestions to buffer stress for sustainability of mental health are proffered, from a socio scientific perspective.

Reality and magnitude of stress

In 2021, four in 10 adults worldwide said they experienced a lot of worry (42%) or stress (41%), while slightly more than three in 10 experienced a lot of physical pain (31%). More than one in four experienced sadness (28%), and slightly fewer experienced anger (23%). (Gallup 2021). More than 7 million Nigerians are suffering from mental problems associated with stress and depression (Obindo, 2022) Nigerians are under greater stress now than even the COVID 19 lockdown (Gureje, 2023). The current economic condition of the country has put a lot of people under stress. Many car owners now have their vehicles off the road because of the exorbitant cost of maintenance

Worry, stress and sadness soared to record levels in Afghanistan in 2021: 80% of Afghans were worried, 74% were stressed, and 61% felt sadness much of the previous]day. However, what is the level of stress in Nigeria as of today? Are Nigerians suffering and smiling? Why are many Nigerians desperate to leave the country at all costs? In Nigeria, high cost of living is a common reason for brain drain and the exodus of professionals outside the country in search of greener pastures. In Nigeria, it is unfortunate that we have the paradox of "Poverty in the midst of plenty" Some are overeating and developing medical problems while others are starving to death. Indeed, poverty is a stressor, but we must not have the erroneous idea that poverty is the only stressor, "the rich also cry'. Rich and famous people do commit suicide.

Gallup's 2022 Global Emotions Report

Gallup's 2022 Global Emotions Report reveals a historic high for negative emotions. The survey of people in 121 nations found that in 2021, levels of stress, sadness, and loneliness reached record levels. A record 41% of people experience high levels of daily stress.330 million adults go at least two weeks without talking to a single family member or friend. Positive feelings, such as laughing or being well-rested, also hit new lows. Countries where social connections are strongest–such as nations in Central America–have the highest positive emotions scores globally. Decision-makers face a disorienting mix of multiple crises. From an economic standpoint, the unprecedented combination of inflationary and recessionary forces at a time of high global indebtedness creates a major source of uncertainty. This is exacerbated by the large number of environmental, geopolitical and societal crises unfolding around the world. Considering this, we should not be surprised by the global rise of unhappiness and unwellness which, in certain countries and quarters, is reaching epidemic proportions (Li et al 2021)

As the Gallup Global Emotions 2022 Report shows, negative emotions (defined as "the aggregate of the stress, sadness, anger, worry and physical pain that people feel every day") reached a new record in the history of Gallup's tracking. Level of unhappiness appears to be increasing. However, the report explains how the global rise of unhappiness started long before the current issues (such as pandemic, inflation and recession risks, geopolitical turmoil, worsening of climate crises, etc.) made the big headlines. In fact, unhappiness has been rising for a decade. Many things contribute to make people unhappy, but five stand out: (1) poverty, (2) weak social connections and communities, (3) hunger, (4) loneliness and (5) lack of good work. . Gallup (2022) documented significant statistics on stress and depression in the USA and globally.

About 3 in 5 adults both in the U.S. (56%) and across the global average (62%) say that stress affected their daily lives at least once in the past year. One third (35% in the U.S. and 34% globally) say stress affected their daily lives several times. Almost as many say they felt stressed to the point where they felt they "could not cope or deal with things" at least once (52% in the U.S. and 60% globally), including three in ten (29% and 31%, respectively) several times. Among respondents who are employed, four in ten (36% in the U.S. and 39% globally) report having felt so stressed that they could not go to work for a period of time at least once in the last year. About half of adults in the U.S. (46%) and globally (52%) say they have felt sad or hopeless almost every day for a couple of weeks or more at least once in the past year. In addition, a quarter (23% and 25%, respectively) say they seriously considered suicide or self-harm at least once.

Impact of stress on the physiology of the body. Stress can either be a triggering or aggravating factor for many diseases and pathological conditions. Stress can have negative effect on the nervous system, immune system, cardiovascular system gastrointestinal complications and endocrine system. (Yaribeygi et al 2017).The state of the mind affects the physiology of the body as implied by the psychosomatic concept.Psychosomatic is a bridging concept coined from the merging of two Greek words " psykhe" translated as "mind" and "somatikos" meaning body. Together they form a word describing the unity of the mind and body (Willacy, 2020) This concept of body- mind interdependence is reflected throughout the world in the current trend to bring physical and psychological Medicine together. Franz Gabriel Alexander (1891-1964) physician and psychoanalyst is considered the father of Psychosomatic Medicine because of his leading role in identifying emotional tension as a significant cause of physical illness. Kaplan (2018) states that some physical diseases are triggered or worsened by stress and anxiety e.g. psoriasis, eczema, stomach ulcers, high blood pressure and heart diseases.

Stress is manifested by different physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral stress-related symptoms, and everyone experiences it uniquely.Cognitive symptoms are forgetfulness, lack of concentration, reduced productivity and errors in judgment while emotional symptoms include anxiety, restlessness, irritability, jealousy, depression and pessimism. Physical symptoms include headache/back ache, increased heart-beat/blood pressure, sweaty palms, nausea, sleep disorders, persistent fatigue and stammering. Behavioural symptoms include aggressive behaviour, overeating/under eating, carelessness, impatience, hostility, accident proneness, increased alcohol and drug consumption and nail biting/ teeth grinding.As stress

negatively impacts mental health, it behaves on this discourse to conceptualize mental health and examine its magnitude.

Mental Health: Conceptualization and Statistics

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well and contribute to their community (WHO, 2022). As recently reported, more Americans now single out mental health as a leading health concern in the U.S. (51%) than any of 12 other major health issues, including COVID (43%). This is a dramatic change from last year when mental health trailed COVID by 33 points (68% vs. 35%). However, on average across all 34 countries surveyed, COVID still tops the list as the main national health concern (47%) this year, with mental health ranking second (36%).WHO mental health statistics (2023) indicates that 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year. One in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.50% of all lifetimes mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34.

As stress appears to be inevitable, various researches have proposed various coping mechanisms. Some regard vices as outlet to the steam of stress.eg smoking, alcoholism and dependence on drugs, which have adverse effects on health. However, healthy coping strategies include muscle relaxation exercises, music, meditation relaxation techniques, social support and cognitive behavioral therapies. Exercise has been shown to have numerous benefits, including stress reduction, improved mood and enhanced cognitive function while progressive muscle relaxation and deep-breathing exercises have been shown to reduce stress (Sui et al 2019). However, as this discourse is from the perspective of Social Work, emphasis will be on social support which is obtained from our network of relationships; the social capital.

Socialsupportandmentalhealth. Human beings are social creatures by nature. Supporting one another, obtaining listening ear, a shoulder to cry on and a helping hand are crucial to happiness and health. Socialsupporthasbeendescribed as the psychological resources provided by a social network to help individuals cope with stress (Cherry, 2023).

Social support refers to any resources whether material, psychological, financial, or emotional – provided by social network to help deal with stress. Importance of social

support includes increased happiness, improved physical health, improved cognitive functioning, and reinforcement of healthy habit. It also helps in easing pain and loneliness of grief, make you feel understood, offer new perspectives and aid in problem solving.

Generally, perceivedsocial support can come from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, family, friends, romantic partners, pets, communityties, and coworkers. A wealth of research has demonstrated that different sources of social support have different influences on mental health in youth [Wise at al 2019]. Specifically, social supportfromfamily, but not fromfriends was related to post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms [Wise et al, 2019]. Sources of support can be natural (e.g., family and friends) or more formal (e.g., mental health specialists or community organizations), andit is necessary to consider the different sources of social support when exploring the relationship between social support and mental health.

Lauetal. (2019) found that as compared with participants inthefamily-depenbcdent tsocial support profile, older adultsin the locally integrated social support profile were negatively associated with dementia. Accordingly, along with family support, it is also essential to consider the role of other sources of social support in mental health within a broader context. (Li et al 2021)

According to the stress-buffering hypothesis, researchersclaimed that social support acted as a buffer to alleviate the negative influence of stress on well-being.
Researchers found that older adults have a greater proportion of close social partners and fewer peripheral partners in their networks compared to younger adults.Furthermore, a meta-analysis thatsystematically reviewed the characteristics of social support (types and sources) associated with protection fromdepression across life stages (e.g., childhood and adolescence, adulthood, older age), found that sources of support varied across life stages, with parental support being the most important among children and adolescents, whereas adults and older adults relied more on spouses, followed by family and then friends (Gariepy et al, 2016)

Physical versus social distance: Era of COVID 19

Physical and social distance are often wrongly used interchangeably. There can be social and psychological distance between husband and wife on the same bed even though there is no physical distance. There can be loneliness in the midst of people.

The WHO announced that it was moving away from the term "social distancing" in a briefing on March 20, 2020. Maria Van Kerkhove, an infectious diseases epidemiologist with the WHO, reiterated that stance in a news conference. "We've been saying 'physical distancing' because it's important to remain physically separate but socially connected," Van Kerkove said, adding that people should be looking after their mental health and that of their loved ones during the pandemic. While physical distance to curtail the spread of the coronavirus was clear, social distance sends a wrong message and contributes to social isolation. Hence Sørensen at al (2021) advocate for rebranding social distancing to physical distancing and call for a change in the health promotion vocabulary to enhance clear communication during a pandemic.

Sources of social support. Support received in times of need could be formal or informal. The informal sources include family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues while formal social support are professionals/public services e.g., professionals, (especially counsellors and social workers) and nongovernmental organizations. This discourse is from the perspective of social worker, hence the need to briefly highlight the Social Work profession.

Social work: A formal source of Social Capital The current global definition of Social work, which was adopted by IFSW, IASSW General Assembly in July 2014 states that:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to Social work. Underpinned by theories of Social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, Social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing".

Social Work is rightly referred to as the Profession of many faces. This is because Social Work is practiced in different settings, addressing different problems and proffering different

solutions. Social work addresses itself to a variety of problems and takes place in a variety of fields (Adebusuyi, 2020).

Today the domain of medical Social Work cuts across the entire continuum of health care. The treatment of stress induced medical problems should move beyond the prescription of drugs to address the stressors. While doctors take care of physical pain, medical social workers take care of psychological pain This is an area of jurisdiction of the social workers in the clinical setting (Adebusuyi, 2021).Social workers provide listening ears for their clients to unburden and this is quite therapeutic .Community based social workers work under the auspices of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Inclusion handling cases of child abuse, domestic violence, paternity dispute, fostering and adoption , juvenile delinquency etc. Social work practitioners work in clinical settings, schools ,industries , rehabilitation centres, correctional facilities

Social skills of the Social work profession includes psychotherapy (the talking treatment) and counselling. Social workers address the underlying psychosocial problems of clients. The Social worker is a professional "friend in need", the counsellor, advocate, educator, mediator and clarifier that can be consulted by needy clients to buffer stress, thus sustaining their mental health.

Theoretical framework

Social capital: Conceptualization and components

 In 2000, Robert Putnam published a popular book titled "Bowling Alone" in which he claimed that social capital has seriously declined in the USA, as people are now bowling alone. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as "connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". Social capital, according to Putnam, emphasizes the importance of the bonds between individuals that bring them together in society. It is referred to as "capital" as these relationships become assets.Just like the Functionalists, Putnam believes that the bond that unites people in the society are crucial to the wellbeing of society as a whole. His ideas are similar to Durkheim's idea of social solidarity. In Putnam's book, reference was made to Durkheim's study of suicide and Putman concluded that lack of social support can increase the rate of suicide. Putman asserts that social capital is said to be rich when there is an active involvement in clubs and organizations. It is also manifested by socializing with people outside one's immediate family, taking part in politics, active involvement in voluntary work and participating in team sport. Putman classified social

capital as bonding social capital and bridging social capital. However, Daniel P Aldrich added a third type to these: the linking social capital.

Bonding social capital reinforces the connections within groups and forms what is known as "Sociological super glue" e.g. a group of friends on the same campus. Bridging social capital on the other hand, reaches out to form connections between diverse groups.eg inter university relationships and collaboration that reflects diversity. Linking social capital is generated during interactions between an individual or a community, on the one hand and the government or elected officials on the other.

Putnam believes that strong social networks tend to foster mutual obligations between people. This dense social network in which people know each other very well and relate well is usually lacking in complex modern societies with the Philosophy of "mind your business".

Limitation of social capital

According to Bourdieu, Putnam underestimated the negative consequences of social capital. Also, group identification emphasized by social capital theory can involve stereotyping of outsiders. Social capital can also be put to perverse uses. People can unite and have solidarity to do evil and commit crime. Social capital can be used for anti-social purposes, just like any other capital. A common example is Timothy McVeigh, a right-wing American terrorist who bombed the Federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and ended up killing 168 people and injuring 800. To achieve this, he used social capital and his charismatic personality to gain the assistance of other people involved in the evil act. This was cleverly done while bowling with co-conspirators.

Social capital can also be used to facilitate corruption, especially among politicians. They become so popular that people overlook their excesses, especially the sociable orators among the politicians.

There has been a general decline of social capital despite "schmoozing" that is now rampant in the world. Schmoozing is talking with someone in a lively and friendly way, typically to impress or manipulate them. The telephone has provided opportunities for schmoozing especially in reinforcing old friendship. The internet, especially, social media has facilitated development of new groups based on shared interest among geographically dispersed people. However, these forms of communication are limited in impact due to absence of non-verbal

communication. Even with video call a lot of pretense can still be in operation. A complimentary theory to social capital, is the Social network theory.

SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY

The term social networking refers to the use of internet-based social media sites to stay connected with friends, family, colleagues, customers, or clients. Social networking can have a social or business purpose through sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Tiktok but Facebook remains the largest and most popular social network. As of April 2023, Facebook had about 3 billion monthly active users spread across the globe. As of May 2023, there were nearly 41.6 million Facebook users in Nigeria. As at January 2023, WhatsApp is the most popular platform in Nigeria (Statista 2023).

With social networking, it is actually a small world, as we can easily link up with each other as indicated by "6 degrees of separation".

6 degrees of Separation

Six degrees of separation describes the idea that all people (and things and places) in the world are just six or fewer interpersonal connections away from each other. It also became known as the Small World phenomena, which describes the idea that everyone is connected to everyone else through six degrees of separation or fewer. It elucidated the idea of Chain of "Friend of a Friend" Also known as "six handshakes rule." Six degrees of separation simply means that all people are six or fewer social connections away from each other. However, Hungarian author, Frigyes Karinthy, in 1929, in an essay titled _Chains_ originally came up with the original concept .A group of people played the game of connecting any person in the world to themselves by a chain of five others. This idea was later popularized by John Guare in his 1989 play titled " Six degrees of separation " The internet, with its accompanying chat rooms, emails, webpages, search engines, and wikis, has resulted in a leap in global communication and connectedness . In 2011, Facebook's data team, in conjunction with the University of Milan and Cornell University, released two studies documenting that amongst all 721 million Facebook users and 69 billion friendship links, there is an average separation of 4.74.In February f 2016, Facebook reported that the distance had decreased to 3.57 among its 1.6 billion users, who made up 22% of the world's population. If that trend continues, by 25% every time Facebook's audience increases by 122%, then, by the time it reaches all 7.4 billion of the world's current population, then the range would fall between an average of just 1 and 2

degrees of separation and connection between all people in the world. Hence, Christley (2017) rightly opined that the world is shrinking and that the six degrees of separation is now two.

Advantages of Social networking

It allows individuals to keep in contact with the family and friends they would otherwise not be able to connect with because of distance or because they simply lost touch. People can also connect with other individuals who share the same interests and develop new relationships.

Hence, with technology, the modern world is shrinking, especially for people with social capital .However social networking has a dark side. Social networking can have a big impact on the spread of misinformation, and it can spread like "wildfire". Information starts as rumours, which spread faster than facts. Hence, the need to be weary of information shared on Social media. At the global level, there has been some efforts to unite the world through social capital.

Global initiative reflecting the utility of Social capital

The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World comes from the People's Global Summit, 'Co-Building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind', held online on 29 June – 2 July 2022. It is a living document and reference point that will grow as the world's populations share their solutions to our joint challenges, so all people can live with confidence, security, and peace in a sustainable world. The People's Global Summit sees the following interconnected, diverse values as a basis for forming a holistic, inclusive framework for our everyday relationships and actions. These are reference points that will be added to for the development of our shared futures in this living Charter:

- o *Buen Vivir("good life" in Spanish), love and care for people and the planet, responsibilities and holistic rights*
- o *Respect, dignity, harmony and social justice*
- o *Solitary Diversity, belonging, reciprocity and equity*
- o *Ubuntu, togetherness, accountability and community*
- o *Solidarity, equality, inclusion and collaboration.*

Philosophy of UBUNTU

Ubuntu can be best described as an African Philosophy that places emphasis on '"' being self through others" Ubuntu is part of the Zulu phrase 'Umuntungumuntungabantu "meaning "I am because we are". It is a philosophical expression of universal bond of sharing that connects humanity. (Mugumbate, 2013) Ubuntu is a philosophy that supports collectiveness over individualism. It is unfortunate that there are homeless landlords, because a house is not automatically a home. . Imagine a lonely man who died and it was four days later that offensive odour emanating from his house drew the attention of neighbors who forced open his door and found his decomposing body. Where are his family members, friends and associates? Does he not attend a church or mosque or nobody cares? This is an evidence of lack of social capital. We need to imbibe the brotherliness of Ubuntu .Just a phone call might save the life of someone at the verge of committing suicide.

UN member states need to commit to their 2030 agenda promise to leave no one behind and to ensure prevention and treatment and inclusion within universal health coverage for people with mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2016)

Summary

This medico- social discourse, focuses on social capital as a panacea to buffer stress for sustainability of mental health. The paper elucidates the magnitude of stress in the cosmopolitan society and the mechanisms for coping with stress, with special reference to mental health. The discourse utilizes WHO mental health statistics (2023), Gallup Stress Statistics (2022) and examines existing scholarly socio scientific research papers. This position paper is backed up by the Social capital and Social Network theories. It sheds light on utility of social capital as a mechanism to buffer stress, while cautioning on the negative utilization of social capital. It reechoes the value of human relationship and the communal African philosophy of Ubuntu in co building a new eco social world. The discourse elucidates the Social work profession as a formal type of social support that renders psychotherapy and counselling to needy clients, for the sustainability of mental health.

Conclusion

Stress is an inescapable part of modern day life. However, one needs to utilize healthy coping mechanisms in order to sustain mental health. Various researches have confirmed that the psychosocial support enhances mental health, as a problem shared is a problem half solved.

There is therefore a need to break the culture of silence, link up and assist each other, in the spirit of Ubuntu, for a rich social capital. Social workers are" professional friends in need" who can be consulted for counselling, to sustain mental health.

SUGGESTIONS

A problem shared is a problem halved

i.   There is a need to break the culture of silence. People who are overwhelmed with stress should speak out and seek help. No man is an island.

ii.   Taking time to reach out and nurture relationships is an important investment in social capital.

iii.   Solitary life should be avoided as it leads to depression. Introverted personality should not be an excuse for not linking up .Introverts can link up with fellow introverts.

iv.   There is a need to improve civic education that stresses the value of helpful relationships

v.   Need to link up with our family members, old friends and classmates

vi.   We need to be more involved in social and community activities   but ensure good time management.

vii   There should e enhancement of social capital through initiatives that fortify solidarity and empathy.

viii.   Caring African spirit of Ubuntu should be imbibed.

ix..   This conference should increase our social capital and foster inter university collaborative research.

x.   There is a need to be very careful and selective, especially on social media. Our private matters should not be made public. We need to look beyond the corporate dressing and apply wisdom when associating with people. Looks can be very deceptive and all that glitters is not gold. Some liars pass lie detector test, even when lying and more intensive forensic investigations have to be carried out to unravel the hidden truth.

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