

***“People with mild depression, one thing that is sustaining them is the teaching from their various religious leaders”:* A qualitative study of religious beliefs about mental health in Nigeria**

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Abstract

Purpose: Mental Health Conditions (MHCs) such as anxiety, depression or psychosis constitute integral aspects of global health disease burden and historically construed differently depending on faith or religious context. Notwithstanding, the Nigerian context of religious beliefs about mental health is under-researched.

Method: The study draws on a qualitative design from a critical realist and social constructionist theoretical lens to explore lay participants (LP) and mental healthcare practitioners (MHPs) perceptions concerning religious beliefs and mental health. A semi-structured interview was adopted to collate data from 53 purposively selected participants recruited from Jos, Zaria, Enugu and Ado-Ekiti cities in Nigeria. Of the 53, (MHPs = 26; LPs = 27; male = 32; female = 21). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: Three major themes emerged, namely: (i) evil forces and spirits are believed to be the primary causes of MHCs (ii) believed in the beneficial role of religious clerics in healing MHCs (iii) description of religious healing as a superior form of treatment modality for MHCs, and (iv) rebuttal of the effectiveness of religious healing for MHCs.

Conclusions: The perceived potency of religious healing as a viable alternative to the western biomedical treatment for MHCs. Mental health policy and practice could strengthen avenues and modalities for religious healing, considering its potential benefits to improving the religious believers' mental health and well-being.

Keywords: beliefs, mental health, Nigeria, perceptions, religious healing, social constructionism