

Attitude Toward Traditional Healers Among Schizophrenic Patients and Their Families in A Study from Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the attitudes regarding traditional healers among patients with schizophrenia and their families in Bahrain.

Design: A cross-sectional study.

Setting: Out-patient Department, Psychiatric Hospital, Ministry of Health, Bahrain.

Method: A total of fifty patients were included in the study from January 2021 to June 2021. The inclusion criteria were 18-65 years with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. They as well as their families were polled on their views on traditional healers using a structured interview.

Result: Many of the patients (46%) visited a traditional healer before visiting a psychiatrist. Majority of the patients who think the cause of the illness is due to supernatural causes attribute it to evil eye 9 (18%), to black magic 6 (12%), and to demon possession 6 (12%). Majority of the patients think psychiatric illness is due to a medical cause 28 (56%). Most of them were literate.

Conclusion: Among patients in Bahrain with schizophrenia, supernatural beliefs were frequent, many of them visited a traditional healer before visiting a psychiatrist and their primary care givers had similar opinions to them. It reflects Bahrain's critical need for mental health knowledge.

Keywords: Cultural healing, Faith healing, Islam, Jinn, Mental disorders, Islam, Muslim, Cultural concept of distress

INTRODUCTION

Schizophrenia is one of the major psychiatric illnesses characterized by both positive symptoms (e.g. Delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized behaviors) and negative symptoms (blunted affect, social withdrawal and neglecting self-hygiene).

It has a prevalence of (1%), males and females are equally affected¹. However, many psychiatrists ignore the importance of culture and religion in the treatment of their schizophrenic patients^{2,3}.

There are several psychological characteristics specific to the Arab culture. Although some of these characteristics may vary from one Arab country to another, however, some general opinions toward the cause and attribution of the mental illnesses are common to all of them⁴. Many patients and their families attribute mental illness to external factors which are beyond their control⁵. Many believe in supernatural forces such as Jinn, evil eye, and magic⁶. The term jinn are used in Islam to refer to both a collective name for all supernatural creatures and a specific sort of supernatural creature. Jinn are frequently discussed in conjunction with demons/devils (Shaytan) when referring to unseen entities in general. A widespread cultural thought of distress among Muslim patients is that jinn may be the source of mental health issues, particularly when hallucinations are present.

Many people in Arab countries believe that demons can possess human beings and that can cause them to behave abnormally and unpredictable⁷. The evil eye is a kind of bad wishes from other people through their eyes which might cause an illness or misfortune in other people. Black magic can be done by a sorceress to call evil spirit and send them to the inflicted person⁸. However, the effect of supernatural forces on Muslim's behaviors and its events is not yet very clear⁹. Some Muslims also think mental illness is a sign of unsound relation with God, a punishment from him, or due to lack of religious rituals¹⁰.

Many of the psychiatric patients visit a traditional healer either before contacting a psychiatrist or even after seeing one¹¹. In Bahrain, it is very common to visit traditional healers to treat both somatic and psychological symptoms. Some of their practices include reading versus of Holly Quran on the patients, reading specific prayers, blowing on the patients, giving holly water to drink, anointing body with oil, and giving him special clothes to wear.

In our study, we try to study the frequency of visiting traditional healers among patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in an outpatient department as well as their beliefs about mental illness. The patient's family's opinion was also taken. This will help our psychiatrist in Bahrain to better understand their patients, their perception of mental illness and the future treatment plans.

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METHOD

The ethical approval to conduct this study was taken from the ethical committee in the Ministry of Health, Bahrain. The study included fifty Bahraini patients as well as their primary care giver in the family. The patients were diagnosed to have schizophrenia according to ICD-10 criteria by a consultant psychiatrist. A list of questions was asked to patients and their primary informant by the consultant after taking their written consent. The first set of questions included their age, sex, marital status, and educational level. The second set of questions included whether the patient visited a traditional healer before or after consulting the psychiatric hospital. The kind of rituals done by the traditional healers. The third set of questions included the patient's opinion about the cause of his/her illness. The same set of questions were asked to the primary family informant.

Data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and were analyzed using descriptive data mainly frequency and percentages. Data collection and data analysis processes lasted six months from January 2021 to June 2021.

RESULT

Fifty patients with their families were included in our study; 22 (44%) were 26-35 years old. Fifty of them (100%) were Muslims. Thirty-one (62%) were males and nineteen (38%) were females. Most of them completed secondary school 26 (52%). Only two (4%) were illiterate. Most of them 33 (66%) were single. Many of the patients 23 (46%) visited a traditional healer before visiting a psychiatrist.

Most of the patients interviewed suffered from paranoid schizophrenia 33 (66%). Most of them were admitted for less than five times to the hospital 27 (54%). The demographic data of our patients is shown in (Table 1). Only few patients 15 (30%) think they benefitted from traditional healer. Most of the traditional healers used reciting the Holly Quran to heal their clients 25 (50%), the other rituals practiced are shown in (Table 2). Only few patients 9 (18%) think psychiatric illness is stigmatizing. Among them 9 (18%) think they have evil eye, 6 (12%) think they are under effect of black magic and 6 (10%) think they are possessed by Jinn (Table 3). Majority 28 (56%) of them think psychiatric illness is a medical illness not caused by any supernatural causes. A small percentage 15 (30%) of the sample visited a traditional healer after seeing a psychiatrist.

Table 1: Patients' demographics

| | Number and percentage |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Sex | |
| Male | 31 (62.0%) |
| Female | 19 (38.0%) |
| Age | |
| 18-25 | 7 (14.0%) |
| 26-35 | 22 (44.0%) |
| 36-45 | 11 (22.0%) |
| 46-55 | 8 (16.0%) |
| 56-65 | 2 (4.0%) |
| Educational level | |
| Primary | 4 (8.0%) |
| Intermediate | 7 (14.0%) |
| Secondary | 26 (52.0%) |
| University | 11 (22.0%) |
| Not educated | 2 (4.0%) |
| Social Status | |
| Single | 33 (66.0%) |
| Married | 9 (18.0%) |
| Divorced | 7 (14.0%) |
| Widow | 1 (2.0%) |

Table 2: Practice by traditional healer

| Practice | Number and percentage |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Spell for Jinn | 3 (6.0%) |
| Holy Quran | 25 (50.0%) |
| Holy Clothes | 6 (12.0%) |
| Blow on Patient | 10 (20.0%) |
| Eat Honey | 1 (2.0%) |
| Beat | 0(0.0%) |
| Spit | 7 (14.0%) |
| Frankincense | 4 (8.0%) |
| Wash with Holy Water | 7 (14.0%) |
| Drink Holy Water | 19 (38.0%) |
| Body Oil | 6 (12.0%) |
| Holy Ring | 4 (8.0%) |

Table 3: Supernatural causes of the illness

| Reason | Number and percentage |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Evil Eye | 9 (18.0%) |
| Black Magic | 6 (12.0%) |
| Jinn | 6 (12.0%) |
| Don't Know | 17 (34.0%) |
| Substance Abuse | 2 (4.0%) |
| God | 10 (20.0%) |

Family members mostly agreed with the patients on the frequency of visiting a traditional healer and the rituals done to them. All of them 50 (100%) think psychiatric illness is not a stigmatizing illness. Their opinion about the cause of the psychiatric illness includes 7 (14%) due to evil eyes, 5 (10%) due to black magic, and 3 (6%) due to demon possession. Most of the primary care givers 35 (70%) think psychiatric illness is a medical illness and not caused by any supernatural forces.

DISCUSSION

In Bahrain, as in different other Arab countries, traditional healers could include a Sayed, Jinn dealers. Witches or people who heal people by simply reading specific versus from the Holly Quran. A Sayed in a man believed to be related to the prophet Mohammed peace be upon him and he is well versed in Islamic teaching. Jinn dealers are usually people who specialized in removing the demons from people who are believed to be possess by them. Witches are believed to be specialized in magic and reading specific spells to heal people from magic. Quran reciters are usually mosque Imams who read specific chapters of Quran on people believed to be possessed by demons or under effects of evil eye or even magical spells to cure them¹².

Some studies identified a link between religion beliefs and mental illness¹³. In the Muslim countries, religion plays a very important role in the lives of Muslims, it influences their beliefs about God, the spiritual world, and the unseen world to them including Jinn (demons), and angels. A study in Saudi Arabia (neighboring country to Bahrain), showed that (91%) of patients were involved in religious activities, either privately or publicly in mosques¹⁴. Some studies suggested that schizophrenic patients are more indulged in religious practice than the public, others suggested the opposite¹⁵. Bahrain population are mostly Muslims and share same beliefs as their neighboring Arabs countries.

Mental health stigma in Muslim communities may be owing in part to a widespread belief among certain Muslims that mental illness is caused by supernatural forces (e.g., jinn possession brought on by one's wicked behavior). To see if the connection between jinn possession and insanity exists in the Muslim holy book, a theme analysis was conducted on four English translations and the Arabic text of the Qur'an. There was

no link discovered between spirit possession and craziness or mental illness. Pagans mocked and labeled people as possessed by jinn simply to isolate and blame them. The utilization of a pagan ritual to link the labeling of persons as Jinn-possessed may be used to educate Muslims, allowing them to reconsider their community's stigma against the mentally sick.

In our study 22 (44%) of patients think that the cause of their illness is supernatural, whereas only 15 (30%) of care givers believe the illness is caused by such causes. Many patients 15 (30%) continue to see a traditional healer even after receiving treatment from a psychiatrist. None of our patients were illiterate, however, many of them visited a traditional healer, which indicates the importance of religious beliefs and culture on them. Attributing mental health problems to Jinn was far more common than previously thought in this community of Muslim patients. This emphasizes the importance of understanding Muslim illness explaining theories and employing culturally appropriate questioning strategies in this demographic.

Yet we think that prior to introduction of modern psychiatric services in Bahrain, all people sought help from traditional healer to help treat mental problems as it was the only available mean to treat such cases. This trend is expected to reduce in the future, with spread of awareness and education in the society to the importance of psychiatric and etiology of psychiatric illness.

CONCLUSIONS

In patients with schizophrenia, supernatural beliefs were frequent and many of them visited a traditional healer before seeing a psychiatrist. It reflects Bahrain's critical need for mental health knowledge. This is the first study in Bahrain to explore the importance of religion and local tradition while treating and diagnosing schizophrenia. Future studies should further study the importance of traditions and religious beliefs in different societies and their probable role in healing of mental illness.

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Competing Interest: None.

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