

Definitions of Health as Determinants of Attitudes, Beliefs and Practices of the Basotho about Health and Illness: A Qualitative Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative, cross-sectional study was conducted among all age groups and genders in Lesotho. The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes, beliefs and practices of the Basotho as determined by their own definitions of health. Qualitative data were collected through individual interviews, telephone, WhatsApp and e-mail. The health promotion classes of 2021-2023 collected the data. The student's transcripts were compiled and analysed after grouping similar responses by age and class of study. The results revealed a broad range of attitudes, beliefs and practices embedded in the participants' own definitions of health. Pain, witchcraft, lack of morals, disobeying God and ancestors were the most reported determinants of health. Young children differed slightly from adults, reporting happiness and fear as determinants of their health. The study concluded that these attitudes, beliefs and practices were informed by inadequate knowledge, which in turn led to negative attitudes, beliefs and practices, as well as to negative definitions of health.

Key words: Definitions of health, attitudes, beliefs, practices

INTRODUCTION

The health of a community is determined to a large extent by its definition of health,

which they may or may not be conscious of. Various contemporary definitions of health have existed since time immemorial, thereby impacting the health of individuals and populations alike. Therefore, the subsequent treatment intervention and restoration of the disrupted health status to a state of good health would align with the understanding of the cause of the disruption. Hence, health sociologists view health as a cultural construction, as the health and illness experience is deeply rooted in how society and the individual view and express it.¹ According to Norman (2006), society and individuals' perceptions of health and illness are responsible for the decisions to, for example, stigmatize illnesses. Health workers also, to a large extent, exhibit this type of attitude, and together they make health-seeking behavior challenging. In addition, whether individuals and communities seek health care is a function of how they define health, which in turn dictates the type of health care they would seek.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative, online descriptive cross-sectional study focused on definitions of health. Data was collected via telephone, e-mail and WhatsApp. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Health Sciences, National University of Lesotho by the health promotion class. Attitudes, beliefs and practices of the Basotho regarding health

were assessed by asking various groups of people differing in age and, to some extent, level of education, the question: “What, according to you, is health and what does being healthy mean for you?” The question was informed by Kelleher and O’Donovan’s book, *Redefining Health and Wellness* (1995).² The question went further to ask: “How do people in your community address their health challenges?” The responses were compiled and discussed in class, incorporating the students’ own definitions over the three years. Data were collected online and physically from 2021 to 2023 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online teaching and learning were implemented. This enabled coverage of a wide range of urban and rural areas as students worked from home. Data were analysed by age for non-students and by level of study for students. The students’ transcripts were then analysed by grouping similar responses from participants of diverse ages and places of residence. The students were also asked to express their own perception of health and illness.

RESULTS

How do the Basotho define Health?

MA Community Health Nursing students’ perceptions and transcripts

- The Basotho define health in terms of pain. When there is no pain, they say they are healthy;
- A healthy person does not complain of pain;
- When they can carry out the activities of daily living;
- When they do not visit the clinic often.

Undergraduate nutrition and environmental health students’ perceptions

- Being able to manage the demands of daily living and fit well with the physical and social environment;
- Health is all about being active and fit to do errands without experiencing difficulties in walking and talking.

Undergraduate nutrition and environmental health students’ transcripts

Children under 10 years

With the help of probes, e.g., when do you feel healthy? Good? Unwell?

- Being healthy meant being able to play and go to school to play with friends because that made them happy;
- Eating nice food and things (which, according to them, meant sweets like candy, ice cream, fizzy drinks, pastries, cakes, biscuits, processed sausage meats, etc.);
- Going to the swimming pool;
- Not having to cross a donga to go to the shop in another village... *“I was afraid when I had to cross the donga to go to the shop... When I had to sleep alone at night in the dark...and when there was thunder and lightning in the sky...then I was terrified of the witches and the beasts, and the monsters, the snakes, the spiders...they live in my village at night...Some spiders and cockroaches live in the house...”*
- *“...When I am sick...when my ear is painful...if my leg hurts because I fell... and I cry, I don’t go to school...I don’t play...”*.

The young and older adults: More prevalent in the rural areas, and among the least educated

- They are wealthy... *“o oa khora...ke sekhorane* (literally meaning he feeds himself and his family very well, with a lot of food)”;
- She is fat, which shows that she is healthy (*O nonne, o phela hamonate*);
- They eat meat every day, they are healthy.

Illness was determined by witchcraft: This belief is more prevalent in the rural areas and among the least educated

- When individuals are ill, they are believed to be bewitched;

- The witches may put *moriana* (witchcraft) on the way where the victim will pass, like a trap. When such a person passes that place and walks across the *moriana*, then illness would set in (he or she is said to have jumped over a bad *moriana* (*o tlotse*) (he has jumped).... *"my late son had his leg amputated. He had jumped across a bad moriana (o na tlotse)".* So I asked, "Did he smoke? *"...yes, he would never take the cigarette out of his mouth."*
- Witches can blow *moriana* through an osmosis-like process when a person is sleeping. The victim will swallow the *moriana* in their sleep in their dream *"...ba mo jesitse bosiu...my poor wife, they all hated her, and we knew who was responsible";*
- The witches may take revenge for something bad they believe an individual may have done to them, knowingly or unknowingly, *"... the neighbour was very angry with her overstepping her boundaries and into her yard... that is why she fell ill. The neighbour was announcing it for all to hear; that she would see. Now she is sick..."*
- They may cause one to get confused when writing exams so that they fail, *"...the woman told me that jealous people from my village, an elderly lady whose grandchildren are envious of me, bewitched me and made me anxious when writing tests and exams... my whole body shakes, and I start sweating...I always feel like leaving everything behind and running away from it all..."*
- The victim can also dream of sleeping and having sex with someone they are not supposed to have sex with. Then matters would go bad for them... *they make you sleep with an animal (phoofolo /thokolosi) and this makes you repulsive to your husband...;*
- That a dangerous insect (*kokoana*) has been inserted in the body of an individual, *"...I consulted this woman in that village there. I was told she was very powerful...She told me that they had*

invested my body with kokoana... Now it is all over my body...it is causing my teeth to ache, and my left side to cramp...so this woman is going to get this insect out...ka ho qobola (a practice done by bleeding a person)....I hear she is very good at it..."

Spoiling/damaging the young children (Ho senya bana): More prevalent in the rural areas, and among the least educated

- This belief is also still prevalent in the rural areas and among the least educated;
- That the newlyweds of nowadays are no longer able to hold their sexual desires, (*ba senya bana*), that is why the child is ill. *"...you see, your sister-in-law, the poor child is ailing because of her lack of sexual restrain. "...if she didn't have sex while the child was still breastfeeding, the child wouldn't have been in this predicament...my brother's daughter-in-law started having sex with her husband or whoever, while the baby was still breastfeeding; that is why the child is so sick... he is spoiled (o sentsoe)"*

Failure to obey the ancestors and the rituals meant to honour them: More prevalent in the rural areas, and among the least educated

- The elderly who are talking to themselves and forgetting stuff (people with dementia), talking about past events and people who are long dead are said to be witches, *"...my brother's widow did not mourn her late husband, that is why she has lost her mind... she talks the whole day and night and now she is even revealing the names of those people she bewitched and killed many years ago as children and as adults..."*

Failure to obey God's will: More prevalent in the rural areas, and among the least educated

- People get ill because they do not obey God's will, they have sinned by engaging in indiscriminate sexual relations before and outside of marriage;

- They go drinking and dancing in nightclubs and bars
- They are witches, they cause other people to get sick and to have misfortunes in their lives

Gender-based violence: University students

- Making married women assume their husband's name and live at his home was an act of violence against them and caused their mental health to suffer.

DISCUSSION

Results revealed a broad range of attitudes, beliefs and practices towards health that, according to the conventional narrative, were informed by inadequate knowledge and by negative attitudes, beliefs and practices. For example, there was this overwhelming belief that illness and health were determined by witchcraft, the wrath of the ancestors, the wrath of God, and failure to observe the many moral rules and rituals as determined by the culture of the Basotho.

Witchcraft is widely believed to exist in Lesotho. When individuals are ill, they are most often believed to have been bewitched. This perception, which is more prevalent in the rural areas and among the least educated, places a heavy burden on the health care system in various ways: First, it delays health-seeking among sick individuals, who seek health care when the disease has progressed to an unmanageable stage, after first seeking traditional medicine or divine healing before they turn to modern medicine. This happens due to inadequate knowledge, and or denial in cases where diseases caused by HIV, or other unhealthy behaviours including smoking or other chronic illnesses, are not well understood. Secondly, the very belief in witchcraft gives rise to violence where individuals who are believed to have bewitched someone and caused their death/illness/misfortune are attacked, and sometimes killed. Thirdly, stressful situations arise between the accused and the accuser's families and neighbourhoods, giving rise to mental illnesses. Lastly, the belief in witchcraft in health and illness is

most destructive when it hinders preventive health behavior and health promotion.

The belief in witchcraft as a cause and remedy for health and illness is found in many other societies as well. Examples include but are not limited to Papua New Guinea, where beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery are believed to cut across all sectors of the society and are perceived to cause harm, as well as be a hindrance to public health initiatives in the country.³ The Azande of Zudan are also similar to the Basotho in their perception of witchcraft.⁴ Children under the age of ten were still scared of witches; however, they equated everything they feared with the supernatural. In their view, witches, beasts, and anything that seemed scary fell in the same category. Furthermore, the young are more pragmatic in their definition of health, including emotional states such as happiness. They describe health as synonymous with happiness, brought about, for example, by eating their favorite foods and enjoying playing with friends at home and at school. For the young, fear disrupts their health; when they are afraid, they feel unwell. It can be concluded that, therefore, mental health seems to define young children's perception of health. This may be understood in the context of psychological theories, including separation anxiety, which describes a child's most stressful occurrence in their young years, that they may not be able to articulate. The older children corroborated the children's view of health as not having to be scared of anything. These included thunder and lightning, crossing dongas running errands, darkness and carrying out heavy tasks like going to the mills.

Health is defined in terms of pain

All groups define health in terms of pain. When there is no pain, the Basotho say they are healthy. It is well documented that not all diseases are symptomatic, particularly chronic illnesses. It is also well documented that pain is, in fact, biopsychosocial and multivariate in nature⁵, as a disease as well as a symptom. Consequently, most people in

Lesotho do not uptake screening services, partly because these are not readily available in public health centers except for HIV and cervical cancer screening. Secondly, access to screening requires a prescription from a medical doctor, but people do not consult a doctor unless they feel pain or discomfort. Lastly, this may be attributable to a lack of awareness of these services as a preventive measure. Therefore, according to the participants, a healthy person does not visit the clinic often as they do not feel pain.

Illness is determined by wealth and looks

According to the participants, an individual who has a lot of food to eat, eats meat every day, and is fat, is considered healthy. This has been the Basotho's perception for ages. To a large extent, this perception may be justified when the opposite is true, and individuals are underweight (thin) because they have nothing to eat or are sick! Of note is the fact that being fat is equated with overweight and obesity. The perception of being fat as a sign of good health is scientifically incorrect because being overweight and obese are adversely related to health. Eating too much meat is also risky to health. These perceptions may denote inadequate knowledge of nutrition and health.

Health and illness are determined by a lack of morals: the 'spoiled child' perception:

When a breastfeeding child gets sick, it is because the mother misbehaved by having sex and sometimes falling pregnant before weaning the child. When this occurs, it is supposedly because the child is spoiled or damaged by suckling the poisonous milk. In many cases, the child falls ill due to malnutrition because the milk may no longer be enough and may be lacking in some essential nutrients to meet the child's nutritional needs.⁶ Access to nutritious food may be a challenge for the mother to keep producing nutritious milk for the suckling baby.⁷ The 'spoiled child' perception is therefore misinformed by myths and

misconceptions devoid of factual, scientific knowledge.

Health is defined as being physically able to carry out the activities of daily living within the context of an enabling environment

The Neo-Marxists define health as freedom from illness, the ability to produce, and liberation from alienation from the production and political systems. In their own words, they define health "*not merely as an individual physical state, but as an outcome heavily determined by capitalist production, social class exploitation, and systemic inequality.*"⁸ In this definition, the Neo-Marxists emphasize the role of the broader environmental factors in health and illness. The NUL Nursing, Environmental Health and Nutrition students' understanding of health as the ability to carry out activities, run errands, manage the demands of daily living and fit well with the physical and social environment resonates with the Neo-Marxist perspective.

Illness and health are determined by failure to obey and honour the ancestors

Elderly women who have dementia are also blamed for being mentally ill because they did not obey their ancestors by, for example, not wearing mourning clothes and not being in mourning for their dead husbands for a determined period, thus angering their ancestors. When the older adults start talking to themselves about long, past events and people who are more often dead, they are said to have killed those people through witchcraft, and now they have come back to haunt them. Hence, they are called witches. They are in that state as a manifestation of the ancestors' wrath. This misinformed negative perception persists among the Basotho communities. Mahlelele et al. (2023) in their study at a selected hospital in Lesotho found that a significant percentage (30%) of participants strongly believed that people with dementia (mostly older women) are witches. They further found out that this

perception stemmed from a lack of knowledge about dementia.⁹

CONCLUSION

Common to the groups was the notion that pain was a major determinant of ill health and that being healthy meant the lack of pain. Secondly, there was this overwhelming belief that supernatural powers, including witchcraft, ancestors and culture, and divine intervention, caused health and illness. Thirdly, illnesses believed to have been caused by witchcraft and other supernatural powers were offset by traditional remedies and prayer. Fourthly, the lack of morals (sexual misconduct) by breastfeeding mothers was also believed to cause young breastfeeding children's ill health.

Fourthly, according to the children under the age of 10, being healthy meant being able to play and go to school to play with friends; to eat nice food and things (which, according to them, meant sweets like candy, ice cream, fizzy drinks, pastries, cakes, biscuits, sausage meats, etc.). On the contrary, sadness, fear and pain denote illness. This perception acknowledges the holistic nature of health and illness by including psychosocial determinants of health, even though it does not explicitly state this.

The results revealed a broad range of attitudes and beliefs towards health that, according to the conventional narrative, were informed by inadequate knowledge, negative attitudes, beliefs and practices. Most importantly, most definitions of health were negative as they portrayed cultural constructions of health and illness that are not evidence-based, factual, or scientific.

Declaration by Authors

Ethical Approval: Approved

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