

Experiences of Affluent Parents with Drug-Abusing Adolescent Children: A Case of Borrowdale West, Harare

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experiences of affluent parents in Borrowdale West, Harare, whose adolescent children abuse drugs. The research aimed to explore four key aspects: (1) how adolescent drug abuse affects parents' psychological well-being, (2) its impact on marital and familial relationships, (3) its implications for parents' societal status, and (4) the coping mechanisms adopted by these parents. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was utilized, employing semi-structured interviews with ten participants selected through snowball sampling. Findings revealed that parents endure significant emotional distress, including guilt, shame, excessive worry, and hopelessness. Marital and familial relationships were often strained, but in some cases, strengthened by shared efforts to tackle the problem. Social perceptions of parents ranged from stigma and judgment to sympathy and understanding. Parents coped using a mix of strategies, such as problem-solving approaches, religious faith, and professional support. Recommendations include the integration of psychiatric nurse support for parents, school-based drug prevention programs, community awareness initiatives to reduce stigma, and further research to examine experiences across diverse socio-economic groups.

Keywords: Affluent, Drug abuse, Adolescent

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse among adolescents presents serious challenges for families, disrupting family systems and affecting the emotional, relational, and social stability of all members involved. Adolescent drug addiction has become a global concern, with a particularly concerning trend in its rise among teenagers. Research indicates that adolescent drug abuse leads to a variety of psychosocial and physical problems, including behavioural issues like fighting, theft, and vandalism, as well as personal consequences such as health problems and strained relationships with family members (Jere et al., 2018). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 14% of girls and 18% of boys aged 13–15 have already initiated alcohol use, with substance abuse accounting for 5% of deaths among people under the age of 30 (WHO, 2019; WHO, 2020).

Globally, regions such as North America, Europe, and Australasia report some of the highest rates of adolescent substance abuse (Romo-Avilés et al., 2019). However, Africa has seen a significant increase in adolescent substance use, with studies demonstrating that young people in low- and middle-income countries are particularly vulnerable (Jere et al., 2018). Zimbabwe is no exception, experiencing a surge in adolescent drug abuse cases in recent years. The Shanduko Foundation (2018) reported that substances such as glue, marijuana, codeine, crystal meth, and cough syrups like BronClever have become increasingly common among Zimbabwean adolescents. Hospitals have also noted an increase in admissions related to drug-related complications, signaling a growing public health crisis.

While substance abuse is often associated with economic hardship, research shows that adolescents in affluent families are also at risk. Ennett et al. (2017) highlighted that children in wealthy suburban neighbourhoods may experience unique pressures, such as high parental expectations, academic stress, and feelings of isolation, which contribute to substance abuse. These pressures can often manifest in affluent communities, where outward success may mask hidden struggles. Parents in these environments may face added challenges, such as societal stigma and community scrutiny, further compounding their distress.

The current study focuses on affluent parents in Borrowdale West, a high-income suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe, aiming to understand their lived experiences. Drawing on Bowen Family Systems Theory, the study views the family as a connected system where the behaviour of one member affects the entire unit (Brown, 2020). The theory provides a framework for examining how adolescent drug abuse disrupts family dynamics and impacts the emotional and social well-being of parents. Previous studies, such as those by Hoeck and Van Hal (2012) and Groenewald and Bhana (2015), have documented the psychological toll on parents of substance-abusing adolescents, including feelings of guilt, shame, helplessness, and anxiety. Building on these insights, this research explores the unique experiences of affluent parents in the Zimbabwean context.

Research Questions

1. How does the abuse of drugs by adolescent children affect their parents' psychological well-being?
2. What are the effects of adolescent children's drug abuse on their parents' marital and other relationships?
3. How is the affluent parents' status in society affected by their adolescent child's drug abuse?
4. What coping mechanisms do affluent parents of drug-abusing adolescent children employ?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological design to explore and understand the lived experiences of affluent parents. Phenomenology, as emphasized by Jasper (1994), focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspective of those directly experiencing them. Given the deeply personal and emotional nature of the subject matter, this approach was considered the most appropriate. It allows researchers to capture the subjective experiences, thoughts, and feelings of participants, providing rich and meaningful insights into their lived realities.

However, to strengthen the depth and breadth of the findings, the study incorporated mixed-method approaches by combining qualitative and quantitative data. This integration of methods provided a more comprehensive understanding of the topic by balancing the detailed, interpretive nature of qualitative research with the measurable, statistical insights of quantitative research.

The qualitative component of the study focused on capturing the detailed narratives and personal stories of affluent parents. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, providing context, nuance, and depth that quantitative data alone could not achieve. The phenomenological framework guided the interviews, encouraging participants to reflect deeply on their thoughts and emotions. This method revealed themes such as parental pressures, societal expectations, and the emotional challenges unique to affluent family dynamics.

The qualitative data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, where patterns and themes were identified to uncover the underlying meanings and motivations behind the participants' experiences. This analysis ensured that the personal and emotional aspects of the topic were thoroughly explored.

To complement the qualitative insights, quantitative data were gathered using structured surveys and standardized scales. These instruments measured factors such as parental stress levels, work-life balance, perceptions of social pressures, and satisfaction with parenting roles. The inclusion of quantitative data allowed the study to identify trends, patterns, and statistical relationships among variables that might not be immediately apparent through qualitative methods alone.

For example, quantitative analysis might reveal correlations between income levels and specific parenting challenges or differences in stress levels based on family size or employment status. This measurable data provided an objective framework to support and validate the qualitative findings.

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data

In this mixed-method approach, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurred at several stages of the research process. During data collection, both interviews and surveys were used concurrently to gather comprehensive information. During data analysis, findings from the qualitative interviews were compared and cross-referenced with the quantitative survey results to identify points of convergence and divergence.

This triangulation process ensured that the findings were robust and well-rounded, capturing both the subjective, lived experiences of participants and the objective, measurable patterns within those experiences. For instance, while qualitative data might illustrate the emotional toll of societal expectations on affluent parents, quantitative data could provide specific metrics on how widespread these pressures are among the sample group.

Research Population

The target population consisted of parents residing in Borrowdale West, Harare, whose adolescent children were known to abuse drugs. The study focused on parents owning residential or commercial property in the area and actively parenting a drug-abusing adolescent.

Sampling and Sample Size

A total of ten participants were selected using snowball sampling and convenience sampling techniques to ensure accessibility and relevance within this sensitive context. These methods were chosen due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, where potential participants may be reluctant to openly discuss their experiences. Combining these two sampling strategies ensured a balance of trust-building and practical accessibility, facilitating a smooth recruitment process.

Snowball Sampling Technique

Snowball sampling, as described by Parker et al. (2019), proved to be an effective method for identifying participants who might otherwise be difficult to reach. This technique relies on existing participants to refer others from their social networks, creating a chain of referrals. In situations where the study's topic is sensitive and participants may feel hesitant or vulnerable, snowball sampling helps build trust through personal connections. When individuals are recommended by someone they know, they are more likely to participate and share openly. This process not only mitigated the fear of stigma or judgment but also enabled the researchers to engage with individuals who had valuable insights but were not easily accessible through traditional recruitment methods. Ultimately, snowball sampling encouraged honest and candid discussions, enriching the quality of the data collected.

Convenience Sampling Technique

In conjunction with snowball sampling, convenience sampling was employed to ensure the practicality of participant recruitment. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on their availability and willingness to participate. This approach made it easier to recruit individuals who were geographically and logistically accessible to the researchers. Given the sensitive nature of the study, convenience sampling allowed the researchers to prioritize participants who felt comfortable sharing their experiences. This method

streamlined the data collection process and ensured that participants were readily available to contribute to the study without unnecessary delays. Additionally, the ease and efficiency of convenience sampling made it possible to gather initial insights quickly, which were crucial for the progression of the research.

Expanding Sample Size for Broader Insights

To enhance the validity and applicability of the findings, it was essential to expand the sample size and include participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. A larger and more varied participant pool provided a richer, more nuanced data and allow for a deeper understanding of the study's subject matter. Including individuals from different socio-economic groups ensures that multiple perspectives are represented, reducing the risk of biased or limited findings. Without such diversity, the insights may disproportionately reflect the experiences of a specific group, limiting the study's broader applicability.

Socio-economic diversity can be achieved by targeting participants from different income levels, educational backgrounds, and cultural contexts. This approach ensured that the study captured a wide range of experiences, making the findings more reliable and generalizable. By accounting for these variations, the research outcomes was better equipped to address the needs and realities of a broader population.

Strategies for Expanding the Sample Size

To achieve a more comprehensive and diverse participant pool, several strategies were employed. First, targeted outreach was implemented by connecting with community centres, social service agencies, schools, and online forums to reach underrepresented groups. These organisations had established relationships within various communities and could facilitate participation.

Second, utilizing mixed sampling methods was beneficial. Combining snowball and convenience sampling with stratified sampling can ensure intentional inclusion of participants from various socio-economic categories. Stratified sampling allowed researchers to divide the population into subgroups based on characteristics like income, education, or geographic location and select participants proportionally from each subgroup. This method ensured representation from each segment of the target population.

Finally, incentivising participation encouraged individuals who may otherwise be hesitant to participate. Offering small incentives such as gift cards, vouchers, or compensation for time and effort made participation more appealing, particularly for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds who had competing responsibilities or limited availability.

By employing these strategies, the study achieved a broader and more balanced understanding of the participants' experiences. Expanding the sample size and promoting diversity ultimately reduced the risk of sample bias, enhance the study's credibility, and ensure that the findings are robust, reliable, and applicable to a wider audience.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These qualitative methods allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences. The semi-structured interview guide facilitated flexibility in probing for deeper insights while maintaining consistency across interviews (Burns & Grove, 2014). FGDs provided additional perspectives through group discussions, enriching the data collected.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data. Interviews were transcribed, reviewed multiple times, and coded to identify recurring themes. This iterative process allowed the researchers to draw meaningful insights while maintaining the authenticity of participants' narratives (Morse & Field, 1995).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities. Participants' rights to privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary withdrawal were prioritized. The researchers also ensured that participants' identities were anonymized to protect their privacy (Rensik, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Effects of Drug Abuse on Parents' Psychological Well-Being

Parents reported profound psychological distress due to their adolescent child's drug abuse. Emotions such as guilt, shame, excessive worry, and hopelessness were commonly expressed. Many participants linked their feelings of guilt to their busy schedules and perceived failure to provide sufficient parental guidance. Shame stemmed from societal judgments and the stigma of having a child with drug problems. These findings align with Groenewald and Bhana's (2015) study, which highlights that parents of substance-abusing adolescents often experience anxiety, insomnia, and helplessness. However, unlike previous studies, no participants in this research reported suicidal ideation, indicating resilience amidst the distress.

Effects on Marital and Familial Relationships

Adolescent drug abuse disrupted marital relationships in various ways. For some parents, it caused significant conflict due to differing opinions on how to address the issue. Others reported strengthened bonds as they united to tackle the problem. Parent-child relationships were also negatively affected, with many parents describing strained communication and feelings of disconnection. Relationships with other children in the family were impacted as well, often due to diminished attention given to siblings. These findings resonate with Hoeck and Van Hal's (2012) observation that parents often feel disconnected from both their substance-abusing child and their other children.

Effects on Social Status

The societal implications of adolescent drug abuse varied among participants. Some parents reported being judged as irresponsible, while others experienced community sympathy. A few participants expressed frustration at being stigmatized and blamed for their child's behaviour. This societal pressure further compounded their emotional distress and feelings of isolation.

Coping Mechanisms

Parents employed a range of coping mechanisms, including religious faith, professional counseling, and problem-solving approaches such as providing money to their children to avoid criminal activity. Some participants also sought help from faith healers or mental health professionals. These findings highlight the resilience of parents but also underscore the need for structured support systems to help them cope effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals the profound psychological, relational, and social impacts of adolescent drug abuse on affluent parents in Borrowdale West, Harare. Parents experience a range of emotional challenges, from guilt and shame to hopelessness and anxiety. Marital and familial relationships are strained, although some families find unity through shared efforts. Societal reactions vary, reflecting both stigma and support. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrate resilience through a variety of coping strategies, though many require additional support to navigate these difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parental Support Programs

One of the critical recommendations from this study is the need to equip psychiatric nurses with specialized training to provide counseling and support to parents of drug-abusing adolescents. The psychological distress

experienced by parents—manifesting as guilt, shame, hopelessness, and excessive worry—underscores the necessity for targeted mental health interventions. Psychiatric nurses could be trained to offer individual counseling sessions that address the unique challenges faced by affluent parents, such as societal stigma and feelings of parental inadequacy. Furthermore, group therapy facilitated by trained professionals could provide parents with a safe space to share their experiences and learn from others in similar situations. These sessions could help normalize their emotions, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster resilience. Additionally, training should include strategies for psychiatric nurses to engage families in creating actionable coping plans, improving communication within families, and building healthier parent-child relationships. Such programs can be rolled out in community health centres, private clinics, or even online platforms to ensure accessibility.

School-Based Prevention Programs

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in preventing adolescent drug abuse and mitigating its associated consequences. This study recommends the introduction of school-based drug prevention programs, including workshops, awareness campaigns, and peer education initiatives. Schools can organize regular seminars that educate students about the risks of substance abuse, including its physical, emotional, and social consequences. These programs should be interactive, employing storytelling, role-playing, and testimonials from recovering addicts to make the message more relatable and impactful. Furthermore, schools can provide teacher training programs to help educators identify early signs of drug abuse among students and take appropriate steps to engage both students and their parents. Counseling sessions for at-risk students can also be integrated into these programs to address underlying factors that may lead to drug abuse, such as academic stress, peer pressure, or mental health challenges. By implementing these measures, schools can help prevent adolescent substance abuse before it begins, creating a healthier and more informed student population.

Community Awareness Campaigns

Reducing societal stigma around drug abuse and shifting public perceptions is essential for supporting families affected by adolescent substance abuse. Community awareness campaigns can play a transformative role by educating the public about the realities of drug abuse and dispelling common misconceptions. These campaigns should aim to foster empathy and understanding for families dealing with drug-related issues, reducing the judgment and isolation often faced by parents. Public service announcements through radio, television, and social media can be employed to spread messages about the dangers of drug abuse and the importance of community support. Community events such as town hall meetings, open forums, and workshops can provide opportunities for dialogue, allowing parents and professionals to share insights and experiences. Faith-based organizations, local leaders, and healthcare providers should also be engaged to disseminate these messages and promote a culture of support and inclusivity. By addressing stigma at the community level, parents of drug-abusing adolescents may feel more empowered to seek help and access resources without fear of judgment.

Research Expansion

This study highlights the need for broader research to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of parents across different socio-economic backgrounds. While this research focused on affluent parents in Borrowdale West, Harare, drug abuse transcends economic boundaries, and families from varying backgrounds may face unique challenges and develop distinct coping strategies. Future studies should examine the psychological, social, and relational impacts of adolescent drug abuse on parents from middle- and low-income families to create a more holistic understanding of the issue. Research can also explore how cultural norms, access to resources, and community attitudes influence parental experiences and coping mechanisms. Comparative studies across socio-economic groups may uncover gaps in support services and inform the development of tailored interventions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the long-term effects of adolescent drug abuse on family dynamics, providing valuable insights into how families navigate these challenges over time. Expanding research in this way will ensure that intervention programs are inclusive and address the diverse needs of all families affected by adolescent substance abuse.

Support Networks

The establishment of peer support networks and counseling services is crucial for empowering parents of drug-abusing adolescents. Peer support groups offer a platform for parents to connect with others facing similar struggles, providing a sense of solidarity and shared understanding. Such groups can be organized at community centres, churches, or even online to accommodate parents who may feel uncomfortable attending in-person meetings. These networks can facilitate the exchange of practical advice, emotional support, and coping strategies, helping parents feel less isolated in their journey. In addition to peer support, professional counseling services should be made readily available, focusing on both individual and family counseling. These services can help parents address their own emotional well-being while also equipping them with tools to manage their adolescent's behaviour effectively. To ensure the sustainability of these networks, partnerships with non-governmental organizations, mental health professionals, and community leaders can be established. By fostering a culture of mutual support and shared learning, these networks can alleviate the burden on parents and improve their overall resilience.

By implementing these recommendations, a comprehensive framework of support can be established to address the multi-faceted challenges faced by parents of drug-abusing adolescents. Each of these measures contributes to a holistic approach, addressing psychological, educational, social, and systemic factors that influence the well-being of both parents and their adolescent children

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