Increasing Mental Health Awareness among College-Age Students in Post-Revolution Tunisia: A Social Intervention

Abstract

This research seeks to address the mental health needs of university-age students in Tunis, Tunisia, a population greatly impacted by enduring societal stigma and silence around these conditions. Following the Arab Spring uprising of January 2011, certain critical socio-political factors, such as political and economic instability, have become significant sources of stress and anxiety in the flourishing democracy of Tunisia, particularly for young people. Studies suggest that 70% of young adults between the ages of 18-35 years have experienced excessive post-revolution stress (SIGMA Conseil Statistiques, 2017). Using an exploratory sequential mixed-method study design, I aim to assess mental health awareness within a population of Tunis-based college students, and use these data to inform a social intervention intended to create a safe space for young adults to have open and informed conversations about mental health.

Problem Description and Personal Statement

Problem Description

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (WHO, 1948). Despite this inclusive definition of health, past research has demonstrated that physical health is generally prioritized over mental health in a variety of global public health and health care settings (Sharan, et, al., 2007). Unlike cancer or chronic diseases, which often have visible effects on the physical body, mental illness often expresses itself in less visible ways for the affected person. Mental disorders represent a complex modern issue in medicine and public health, and are often poorly understood and socially stigmatized in a variety of country contexts (Davey, 2013).

Negative perceptions of mental health stem from the psychosocial and environmental influences that impact our collective knowledge of these disorders, and for those impacted by such disorders, can be a significant determinant in their willingness to seek medical care or help when needed. (Gulliver et, al., 2010; Schmidt, 2015).

The Arab Spring uprising has further complicated the mental health needs of young Tunisians. Tunisia is a country in North Africa with a population of 11.4 million people, and was a leading country of the Arab Spring in January 2011. Within a short span of years, Tunisia's young adults have experienced a transition from an environment of authoritarian political control, to an environment of freedom and opportunity for public expression but with lingering socio-economic and political uncertainty. Within this context, recent studies show that young Tunisians are facing significant stress, and that 40% of Tunisians between 20 and 30 years-old

wish to participate in clandestine immigration (Forum Tunisien pour Les Droits Économiques et Sociaux, 2017). The increase of cigarettes, alcohol, and substance abuse, along with the rise in suicide rates are just a few examples that depict the unsatisfying conditions that young Tunisian adults are currently experiencing (Sellami, et. al., 2016).

Tunisia is one of the leading countries in Africa when it comes to advanced health care systems. Overall, the health care system in Tunisia ranks as the 52nd best in the world, as well as the second best in Africa, following behind Morocco (World Health Organization, 2014). Yet despite its advanced health care system, there still exists a large gap regarding the quality and accessibility to mental health care more specifically (DALY, 2017; WHO, 2014; Carte Sanitaire de la Tunisie, 2011).

Indeed, mental health training for primary care staff comprises approximately 3% of total training for nurses and 9% for medical doctors, and the professional-to-population ratio for mental health providers stands at 8.2 providers for every 100,000 population (WHO, 2014). These figures further emphasize the challenges Tunisia faces in addressing the mental health needs of its citizens.

Against the current backdrop of modern-day Tunisia, my research presents an opportunity for engaging Tunisia's young adults in proactively addressing their mental health needs. Through this research, delineated below, I aim to better understand the mental health needs of young Tunisians, and create a space for them to become their own advocates of health.

Personal Background and Motivation

While living in Tunisia, my native home, I had the chance to experience the Jasmine Revolution that was responsible for igniting the flames of the Arab Spring, eventually spreading

across the Arab world. Living in such a profound time in Tunisian history allowed me to see the beauty in people, not only in the banding together for a common good, but also in the commitment of individuals to stand up for their rights. This has had a profound impact on my motivation to participate in the rebuilding of a new Tunisia. As Tunisia is fighting to encourage the growth of democracy and freedom, I wish to also implement my personal goal of attaining a culture where the recognition of an individual's own feelings and thoughts are welcome and mental health is seen as a priority alongside physical health.

The expulsion of the dictatorship and the casting of Tunisia's first democratic votes were our first steps towards democracy and a new culture of freedom. This emerging culture has been introduced and implemented mainly by the young adults of Tunisia. Growing up in Tunisia during this time, I learned to value freedom of speech and the unimpeded exchanges of ideas. Most of all, I learned how to listen and thoroughly analyze complex ideas and concepts, which nourished my passion of conversation-based learning. In fact, I believe that interacting with others is one of the most effective ways of learning. Through my engagement in intellectual and philosophical conversations, I have continuously been astonished by the strong link between personal and collective perceptions of a given issue. I recognized that what we believe is subjective, and a result of our perceptions of the environment. I find it astonishing that humans are products of their own environments and that these environments are also products of larger communities and societies.

The realization of this reciprocity between an individual and his or her environment made me recognize that in order to change a population's perception of a given topic, it is crucial to change the environment. Furthermore, in order to change the environment it is first necessary to change the individual's perception.

I believe that my personal background and motivation, along with my academic preparation in Public Health, Statistics, and Philosophy, will allow me to confidently lead this project. I see this project as a scholarly yet practical attempt to raise awareness about the importance of mental health in Tunisia. My experience with philosophical and design thinking allow me to look at the problem from different perspectives, which will help in the implementation of an effective and innovative intervention.

Moreover, my familiarity and experience in data analysis will allow me to conduct a thorough and substantive project. From Fall 2016 to Spring 2017, I served as a research assistant on a project examining the use of medicinal plants used by the Montagnard Community, a Vietnamese minority currently living in Greensboro. From this experience, I was exposed to multiple methods used in data analysis. Additionally, during the spring of 2017, I conducted interviews for Alamance Citizens for a Drug-Free Community, which looked at substance and alcohol use among youth in Alamance County. This was yet another great experience for me, helping me to become more familiar with conducting interviews and collecting data for research.

In addition to the the research skills that the Leadership Prize committee expects, I also have familiarity with program implementation. My past work with international non profit organizations, such as Afghanistan International Foundation for the Blind and Doctors without Borders, represents some of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. Working both as a general manager and volunteer, I was able to gain a deep understanding of the challenges that arise through the process of both social and environmental intervention implementation.

Throughout my Elon career, and more particularly through my work as public relations officer and vice president of the Elon International Society, I have been committed to demonstrating leadership, responsibility, and effective time and money management—all

qualities that will better equip me to successfully conduct this research. Finally, my familiarity with the Tunisian culture and my expertise in the French, Tunisian dialect, and Literary Arabic will allow me to connect and work effectively with the population of interest. I look forward to demonstrating these capacities over the course of the proposed project.

Plan for Intellectual Inquiry

The three main objectives of this proposed project are to understand, transform perception, and raise awareness around mental health for young adults in Tunisia. These objectives will be achieved through three distinct parts. First, I intend to conduct a baseline assessment of mental health awareness in a purposive sample of college students in Tunis, Tunisia through exploratory sequential mixed-methods procedures (Creswell, 2014). Based on these data and existing prior research, I next plan to train a small subset of study participants to become peer advocates for mental health. The third and final step will be a post-assessment and evaluation of the program. This final step will allow me to evaluate the program's intended aims, and potentially provide input into a lasting project that can endure after I complete this research.

My intervention is a social intervention that aims to raise awareness about mental health, working in collaboration with local clubs and organizations that I have already identified (further details are provided below). It intends to do this through the use of creative art to encourage self-expression. In other words, this intervention will create a safe space where young adults can express their feelings and thoughts through the use of art and creative writing. I aim to address two key goals through this intervention. First, I hope to promote mental health awareness through peer-led opportunities to express personal feelings and thoughts through creating art. These works of art will be publicly shared in order to normalize the idea of talking about thoughts and feelings. The second goal of the intervention is to promote a better understanding

understanding of specific mental health conditions and symptoms, and ways to seek help. I will hold open information sessions and create flyers in tandem with the artistic exhibit.

It is crucial to mention that while I frame my study within the context of the broader literature, and have a data collection plan to further inform this work, the "intervention" phase of this project remains flexible and open to change. In order to implement a successful social intervention, I am planning to use participative leadership style (Amanchukwu et, al., 2015). I believe that this method is the most effective leadership theory that would work in this type of intervention because it requires the input of the population of interest in order to achieve progressive change.

The participative leadership style method requires six major steps, on which my intervention will be based. First is the facilitation of conversation with members of the community. This going to be the essence of my study, aiming to identify young adults' perceptions of mental health.

Next in the participative leadership style is the stage of sharing information and knowledge with the population of interest. This step is going to feature one of the two goals of my intervention mentioned earlier, which is informing young adults about the causes and potential consequences of mental illness if left untreated.

The third step includes encouraging the population of interest to share their ideas regarding the intervention. This will be achieved through the use of surveys and interviews before and after the program implementation period.

The two final steps are going to be based on the synthesis of all the available information through analyzing the study, surveys and the setting of a clear conclusion. The conclusion will take into consideration the best possible decision regarding the type of intervention, which would

result from considering locals' ideas regarding the issue, my own ideas, and the results from the research. This step will serve as the evaluation for the program. Lastly, I will communicate the chosen decision back to the local leaders that would be piloting the project, through an effective and durable intervention.

My specific choice of using the participative leadership method is based on the desire to implement a sustainable intervention. I hope to achieve this goal by training local young leaders already involved in community work, to become mental health peer educators and I will use their relevant inputs about the program into to the decision-making process. This method will allow me to improve not only local young adults' commitment to the intervention, but will also establish a group of informed leaders capable to maintain the functioning and, potentially, extend the intervention to evolve into a nationwide campaign.

A more detailed step-by-step plan for my intellectual inquiry is cited below:

- Continue to explore the existing knowledge and research on the impact of the Arab Spring on my targeted population.
- Further increase my familiarity with intervention research related to health promotion by attending the two conferences: the Art & Science of Health Promotion, and the 29th World Summit on Positive Psychology, Mindfulness, and Psychotherapy.
- Design data collection tools and obtain IRB approval
- Connect and meet with the leaders of two key nonprofit organizations serving my target population:
  - AIESEC Tunisia, a non-profit youth-run organization, to discuss the goals and feasibility of the project; and

- ○ Rotaract Club La Marsa, a social service club for young adults, to discuss the goals and feasibility of the project.
- Select prospective peer educators from these organizations/clubs.
- Meet with the prospective peer educators, through several training session to train them for comprehending skills and understanding of the philosophy of the project.
- Conduct exploratory interviews (N=10) to further inform the intervention phase of this project
- Analyze qualitative data. For this step I will work directly with my research mentor, along with psychology professors such as Dr. Ghandour and Dr. Longmire-Avital, as needed.
- Travel back to Tunisia to implement the intervention.
- Meet with the leaders and prospective peer educators and start working on the opening event of the program.
- Advocate for the project on different social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat filters.
- Come back to Elon University and start working on the surveys to evaluate and measure the program's success.
- Connect weekly with the local leaders to keep track of the event progress.
- Send out surveys (N=100) to assimilate the success of the program.
- Based on the results and using the help of my Public Health mentor Dr. Katherine Johnson and working in collaboration with the Psychology and Statistics faculty to adjust the program to the local needs.

- Share my study findings and my intervention at SURF day and other relevant disciplinary conferences such as the American Public Health Association

- Prepare a manuscript to submit for peer-review at relevant disciplinary journals such as *Pedagogy In Health Promotion.*

Feasibility statement:

I am very aware of the difficulties I will be facing throughout the process of data collection and program implementation. Notwithstanding these challenges, I am confident that my familiarity with the Tunisian culture along with my personal connections with leaders from different non-profit organizations in Tunisia allow me to connect with the local population in order to successfully conduct my study and implement my intervention. I have established contacts at the two organizations involved in this research: 1) Rotaract Club La Marsa, a social service club for young Adults between 18-30, with the main goal of improving leadership skills of young adults through their involvement in their community, and 2) AIESEC Tunisia, a branch of the world's largest non-profit youth-run organization with the main goal of providing young people with leadership skills in order to have a positive impact on their local community are going to be my main strategy to maintain a long-lasting intervention.

I am confident that I am able to conduct the proposed study and implement the intervention in the required timeline due to my connections with a variety of faculty and staff at Elon University, from different departments, including Public Health Studies, Statistics and applied psychology scholars. In addition I have fostered a relationship with relevant scholars at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Duke University, who have previously conducted research on different topics related to Post-Revolution Tunisia.

Below are the detailed budget use and timeline:

Budget:

Books:
- *Creative Arts in Counseling and Mental Health* / Edition 1 by Philip M. Neilsen, Robert J. King, Felicity A. Baker : $47.64
- *Mental Health, Psychiatry and the Arts: A Teaching Handbook* / Edition 1 by Victoria Tischler : $50.95
- *Global Mental Health: Prevention and Promotion* by Sabine Bahrer-Kohler (Editor), Francisco Javier Carod-Artal (Editor) $139
- *Community Mental Health* / Edition 1 by Lois A. Ritter, Shirley Manly Lampkin : $28.01
- *Positive Psychology in Practice: Promoting Human Flourishing in Work, Health, Education, and Everyday Life* / Edition 2 by Stephen Joseph : $93.12

Total: $358.72

Conferences:
- 29th World Summit on Positive Psychology, Mindfulness and Psychotherapy in NYC : $350
- Flight Raleigh- NYC : $250
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- 2018 Art & Science of Health Promotion Conference in San Diego California: $395
- Flight to San Diego, CA : $500
- 2 Nights in a hotel : $500

Total: $1,995

Trip to Tunisia, summer 2018:
- Plane ticket NYC- Tunis: $1,000
- Transportation for 2 months: $300

Trip to Tunisia, Winter 2018:
- Plane ticket NYC- Tunis: $1000
- Transportation for 6 weeks: $200

Total: $2,500

Interviews and Surveys:
- Incentives for 100 surveys: $1000
- Incentives for 50 interviews: $1000

Total: $2,000

Intervention:
- Opening event: $500
- Events T-shirts: $500
- Stickers, posters, and flyers: $500
- Expenses for 5 extra events: $1000

Total: $2,500

Overall expenses: $9,353.72

Timeline:

Winter term 2018	Practicum with American Cancer Society in New York (a requirement for my Public Health Studies major)
February - April 2018	Survey design and sampling method assessment
April-June 2018	Collect data through online surveys.
June 2018	Travel to Tunisia
June 2018	Meet with the leaders from collaborating partner organizations, and select prospective peer educations
July-August 2018	Meet with the prospective peer educators, through several training session to train them for comprehending skills and understanding of the philosophy of the project.
July-August 2018	Conduct interviews that mainly focus on the potential intervention, and learn about people's thoughts on the prospective project.
End of August 2018	Go back to Elon University
September-October 2018	Analyze the surveys to gain a well rounded context of mental health assessment by young adults.
November-December 2018	Analyze the data collected through interviews on the type of intervention that is most preferred to be implemented
15th December 2018	Travel back to Tunisia
15th December 2018 -15th January 2019	Opening event preparations

14th January 2018	**Opening event**
End of January 2019	**Travel back to Elon**
February 1st 2019	**Surveys to evaluate and measure the program's success**
February 14th 2019	**Send out online surveys to assimilate the success of the program**
March 2019	**Last program adjustments**
March 2019	**SURF Day presentation**

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