EVALUATING PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UGANDA: SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION

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UGANDA: SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION

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Psychosocial problems among university students occur in a wide variety of settings.
Research has shown that these problems often negatively impact on students' mental health often
leading to maladaptive, negative or unhealthy coping mechanisms compromising student
academic performance. The resultant mental health problems include emotional,
conduct/behavioural, educational, social/interpersonal problems as are often prevalent among
adolescents and the youth. Most existing instruments to assess psychosocial problems among
university students in the Ugandan setting were developed in foreign American or European
settings and not culturally conclusive enough to address the contextual problems of university
students in Uganda. Moreover, psychosocial problems as a construct have been rarely
researched as multi-dimensional issues.

 This study aimed to develop an instrument for use in screening university students for
psychosocial problems in a Ugandan setting; one that is devised through theoretical and
empirical methods, is psychometrically sound, is suitable for and adds to early detection of
psychosocial problems among Ugandan university students.

The study used an exploratory, descriptive cross-sectional survey design and consisted of two
phases of data collection: formative qualitative and quantitative techniques in four sequential

steps of model specification, model identification, model estimation and model testing for conducting a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis.

The formative qualitative phase was reflected in the model specification step that guided in item generation and in developing a hypothesized theoretical model to determine variables of interest and the relationships among them. The respondents for this first phase included altogether 54 key informants and university students who were respectively recruited from the three purposively chosen representative universities in Uganda.

The second phase was the quantitative part of the study. It included model identification, model estimation and model testing which constituted the empirical approach to scale development. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) processes were used to identify the theorized model and to determine whether the hypothesized structure derived from the EFA provided a good fit to the data. Two different groups of respondents, 1427, 869 randomly recruited undergraduate students completed the questionnaire.

The internal reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha. Both construct and predictive validity of the instrument were determined against the 10-item Hopkins Symptom Check List, which was taken as the gold standard. The psychometric properties of the instrument were determined using Pearson scores and Chronbach alpha coefficients as well as ROC curves to determine cut off points for caseness and degrees of difficulty (mild, moderate or severe) for intervention. The results indicated that the developed and validated instrument had psychometrically sound properties. The instrument was code-named the **U**niversity **S**tudents **E**valuation of **P**sychosocial **P**roblems (USEPP) scale. It is a 17-item Scale.

USEPP cut off point was established at 18 and it reported sensitivity at 99.1% (95%CI= 95.-100), specificity at 98.03 %(95% CI=96-99) p<0.0001, +PV=95, -PV =96 and Area under curve

(0.997). It has an internal consistency of 0.81. The USEPP is a four multidimensional instrument capturing emotional, antisocial, academic problems and traumatic experiences as predictors of psychosocial problems among university students. The validation indicated that USEPP measures psychosocial factors, it discriminates university students with or without psychosocial problems and it can predict psychological distress.

The final validation of USEPP included 976 randomly selected undergraduate students from five purposively selected universities in Uganda: one public and four private and this further supported the psychometric properties of the instrument. The results demonstrated internal consistency of 0.82 as measured by Cronbach's alpha.

In conclusion, USEPP may be used to screen for psychosocial problems among university students for early intervention and for research purposes.