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Narrative accounts of mental illness by older villagers in Limpopo

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ABSTRACT

Currently, conceptualisations and meanings of mental illness are deeply rooted in Western models of mental health. Mental illness is a socially constructed concept that is not isolated from a particular historical context and is mostly informed by societal and cultural beliefs. Indigenous elders and their stories and knowledges about mental illness are often not included in literature. For this reason, the aim of this research was to understand how older villagers in Limpopo province make meaning of mental illness using a narrative approach rooted in decolonial and narrative theory as theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. Convenience and snowball sampling were utilized to draw ten participants over the age of 60 years in Limpopo within two villages located in the Greater Sekhukhune district. Narrative thematic analysis was used to analyse data derived from semi structured interviews. The findings of this research suggest that elders in Limpopo contribute significantly to their communities to maintain mental health as well as to manage mental illnesses that may arise. Mental illness was found to be associated with madness which was understood to manifest in the form of abnormal behaviours. Moreover, treatment towards people with mental illness was dependent on how the community made sense of particular people's illness. Furthermore, four causes of mental illness were identified as follows: witchcraft, stress, food, and the abuse of substances. In addition, the research found that even though indigenous modes of healing are predominantly used, Western and integrative healing systems were acknowledged by the participants. From the findings, it is evident that conceptualisations and meanings of mental illness in the villages of Limpopo are not solely traditionally African or Western. In the narratives, culture, religion and lived experiences informed how older villagers heal and make meaning of mental illness. Overall, the study highlighted the need for extensive local research that would enrich policy makers, scholars, researchers, and health practitioners with knowledges about mental illness and health as understood by the native people which could increase the effectiveness of multiple healing systems.

Key words; *mental illness, elders, narrative theory, decolonial theory, stories*