

Systematic Review

Occupational mental health in the niger delta: a systematic review of stressors and interventions

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ABSTRACT

Occupational mental health in Nigeria's Niger Delta is profoundly impacted by a confluence of factors, including environmental degradation from oil extraction, pervasive socioeconomic instability, ongoing social unrest and the systemic issue of "disconnected capitalism." These elements collectively create a high-stress environment for workers in the region. This systematic literature review aimed to comprehensively analyze existing research (2000-2025) on occupational mental health in the Niger Delta, identifying key stressors, evaluating mental health service availability and exploring proposed interventions. Utilizing databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar, we synthesized findings narratively. The review identified primary stressors as environmental degradation (linked to depression, anxiety, PTSD), socioeconomic factors (contributing to depression, anxiety, frustration), oil and gas industry hazards (causing burnout, anxiety) and "disconnected capitalism" (fostering powerlessness, resentment, chronic stress). A critical finding was the limited availability of mental health services. In conclusion, occupational mental health in the Niger Delta is severely affected by these interconnected environmental, socioeconomic, industrial and systemic stressors. Addressing this crisis necessitates comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions focused on environmental remediation, socioeconomic development, workplace well-being, equitable resource distribution and significantly improved mental health services.

Keywords: Disconnected capitalism, Environmental degradation, Niger delta, Occupational mental Health, Oil and gas industry

INTRODUCTION

Occupational mental health is a critical aspect of individual well-being and a significant contributor to global productivity.¹ The modern work environment, particularly in regions undergoing rapid industrialization, often presents numerous stressors that can negatively impact psychological well-being. This is particularly evident in areas with significant resource extraction activities, such as the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Niger Delta, while crucial to Nigeria's economy due to its vast oil reserves, has faced decades of environmental damage, socioeconomic instability and social unrest.²

These factors create a unique and challenging context for occupational mental health.

The Niger Delta's oil and gas industry, while providing economic benefits, has also led to substantial environmental degradation, including oil spills, gas flaring and water pollution.³ These environmental problems have disrupted traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming, leading to economic hardship and social displacement.⁴ Additionally, the region has a history of conflict and social unrest, driven by grievances over resource control and inequitable distribution of wealth.⁵ This combination of environmental, economic

and social stressors creates a high-risk environment for occupational mental health problems. This review will also examine the concept of "disconnected capitalism" and its relevance to the Niger Delta, highlighting how the structure of the oil industry can create unique stressors.⁶

This systematic review aims to analyze the existing literature on occupational mental health in the Niger Delta. It will identify the primary stressors affecting workers in the region, assess the availability and accessibility of mental health services and evaluate the effectiveness of potential interventions. By synthesizing the current state of knowledge, this review seeks to inform the development of targeted interventions and policies to promote occupational mental health in the Niger Delta.

Review of related literature

A substantial body of global literature emphasizes the critical significance of occupational mental health. The World Health Organization underscores the considerable economic and social burdens associated with diminished mental well-being in the workplace, noting its widespread impact on the global workforce.¹ Research has consistently identified factors such as job insecurity, extended work hours and inadequate workplace support as key contributors to work-related stress and the development of mental health problems.⁷ These global trends are often amplified in developing nations, particularly those with economies heavily reliant on resource extraction industries.

Studies examining the mental health consequences of environmental degradation, a prominent concern in the Niger Delta, have established a clear link between exposure to pollution and the loss of natural resources and increased rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁸ For instance, Osofsky et al, research on the psychological impacts of oil spills revealed long-term mental health consequences, including elevated rates of depression and anxiety in affected communities, persisting years after the initial incident.⁹ Within the Niger Delta context, recurrent oil spills and pervasive environmental damage have been associated with heightened community stress and diminished overall well-being.¹⁰

Socioeconomic factors also exert a considerable influence on occupational mental health within the Niger Delta. Despite the region's substantial oil wealth, poverty, unemployment and social inequality remain widespread.¹¹ A consistent body of research indicates a strong association between poverty and unemployment and an increased prevalence of mental health problems.^{12,13} The scarcity of economic opportunities and the daily struggle for basic necessities can induce chronic stress, contributing to the development of depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders. The situation in the Niger Delta is further compounded by perceptions of

inequitable resource distribution, fostering feelings of frustration and resentment among the populace.¹⁴

The dominant oil and gas industry in the Niger Delta presents a unique set of occupational hazards that impact worker mental health. Employees in this sector frequently encounter dangerous working conditions, exposure to toxic substances and prolonged periods of separation from their families.¹⁵ Research suggests that these factors contribute to elevated rates of stress, burnout and various mental health problems among oil and gas workers.^{16,17} The demanding nature of the work, coupled with the inherent risks of accidents and industrial disasters, creates a high-stress occupational environment that can significantly affect psychological well-being.

Furthermore, the concept of "disconnected capitalism" offers a valuable lens through which to understand the occupational mental health challenges in the Niger Delta.³ This framework describes a system where the benefits of economic activity are concentrated within a small elite, while the majority experiences marginalization and exploitation. In the Niger Delta, this is evident in the disproportionate capture of oil wealth by multinational corporations and the Nigerian government, leaving local communities to bear the brunt of environmental degradation and economic disenfranchisement.¹⁸

This disconnect fosters a sense of injustice and powerlessness, contributing to increased stress and mental health problems among both workers and community members. Studies highlight manifestations of this disconnection in the Niger Delta, including precarious employment with limited security and benefits, a lack of community benefits despite industrial presence, environmental injustice impacting health and livelihood and social alienation stemming from exclusion from decision-making processes.^{2,3,11,14}

The mental health consequences of this "disconnected capitalism" are significant, potentially leading to chronic stress, depression, anxiety and a sense of hopelessness, which can impair individuals' ability to work, maintain relationships and participate in their communities. Compounding these issues is the limited availability and accessibility of mental health services in the Niger Delta, characterized by a scarcity of professionals, facilities and resources, alongside cultural stigma that discourages help-seeking behaviors.¹⁹ The reliance on traditional healing practices further underscores the need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions in the region.²⁰

In a related study conducted within Nigeria, Imbazi investigated the relationship between occupational stress management techniques and employee well-being in table water production firms in Bayelsa State.²¹ Focusing on relaxation techniques and flexible working arrangements as indicators of broader stress management approaches, the study of 81 employees found a significant positive

correlation between these techniques and employee well-being. He concluded that occupational stress management is crucial for promoting employee well-being in this sector and recommended that companies implement policies to enhance employee access to stress management resources.²¹ This study, while focused on a different industry within the Niger Delta region, highlights the importance of addressing occupational stress to improve employee mental health, a theme relevant to the challenges faced by workers in the dominant oil and gas sector as well.

Cooke-Gam et al, directly compared the occupational stress levels of workers within the Oil and Gas sector to those in the civil service in the Port Harcourt area of the Niger Delta.²² Their study of 447 personnel revealed significantly higher stress levels among Oil and Gas workers, alongside differing psychological health characteristics compared to civil servants. While the impact of psychosocial job task factors was similar across groups, key risk factors for occupational stress in the Oil and Gas sector included psychosocial aspects of roles, environmental conditions and individual psychological health. The authors recommended regular evaluations to address job elements contributing to psychological distress.

Further underscoring the detrimental effects of work-related stress in the Niger Delta's petroleum industry, Esitikot et al, explored its impact on organizations and worker productivity.²³ Grounded in the Person-Environment fit theory, their multiple case study of supervisors identified stress as a consequence of a mismatch between worker needs and the organizational environment. Their findings indicated that work-related stress increases susceptibility to workplace incidents and leads to occupational health challenges such as reduced efficiency, impaired judgment, fatigue, psychological disorders and poor decision-making, ultimately impacting organizational profitability. The study recommended the identification and implementation of appropriate strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of work stress in the petroleum industry.

METHOD

This systematic literature review was conducted to explore the key occupational stressors affecting mental health in the Niger Delta and the interventions proposed or implemented to address these challenges. The review process adhered to the three-stage framework: planning, selection and extraction and execution.²⁴ Figure 1 shows the processes carried out in this review.

Planning stage

The planning stage involved defining the research question, determining the scope of the review and developing a search strategy. The research question

guiding this review is, what are the key occupational stressors affecting mental health in the Niger Delta and what interventions have been proposed or implemented to address these challenges? The scope of the review includes studies on occupational mental health in the Niger Delta, with a focus on the impact of environmental degradation, socioeconomic factors and the oil and gas industry. The search strategy involved a comprehensive search of electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar. The search terms included combinations of the following: ("Occupational Health" OR "Workplace Stress" OR "Mental Health" OR "Psychological Distress") AND ("Niger Delta" OR "Nigeria") AND ("Oil Spill" OR "Environmental Pollution" OR "Poverty" OR "Unemployment" OR "Social Conflict") AND ("Disconnected Capitalism"). The search was limited to English-language publications.

Selection stage

During the selection stage, studies were screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria stipulated that studies must focus on the relationship between work and mental health in the Niger Delta; examine the impact of environmental degradation, socioeconomic factors or the oil and gas industry on mental health outcomes, provide empirical data or theoretical analysis of occupational mental health within the region; and address the concept of "disconnected capitalism" in the Niger Delta context.

Conversely, exclusion criteria specified that studies would be excluded if they: did not address occupational mental health; were not specific to the Niger Delta region; were published in languages other than English; or were non-research articles (e.g., editorials, opinions). The screening process was independently conducted by two reviewers (Ukoba O and Peterkio), with any discrepancies resolved through collaborative discussion and consensus.

Extraction and execution stage

The extraction and execution stage involved extracting relevant data from the selected studies and synthesizing the findings. A standardized data extraction form was used to collect information on study characteristics from 2000 to 2025, occupational stressors, mental health outcomes, interventions and findings related to "disconnected capitalism." The data was synthesized using a narrative approach, grouping studies based on common themes and research questions

RESULTS

Table 1 presents a summary of the primary stressors identified in the literature concerning occupational mental health in the Niger Delta region and their associated consequences.

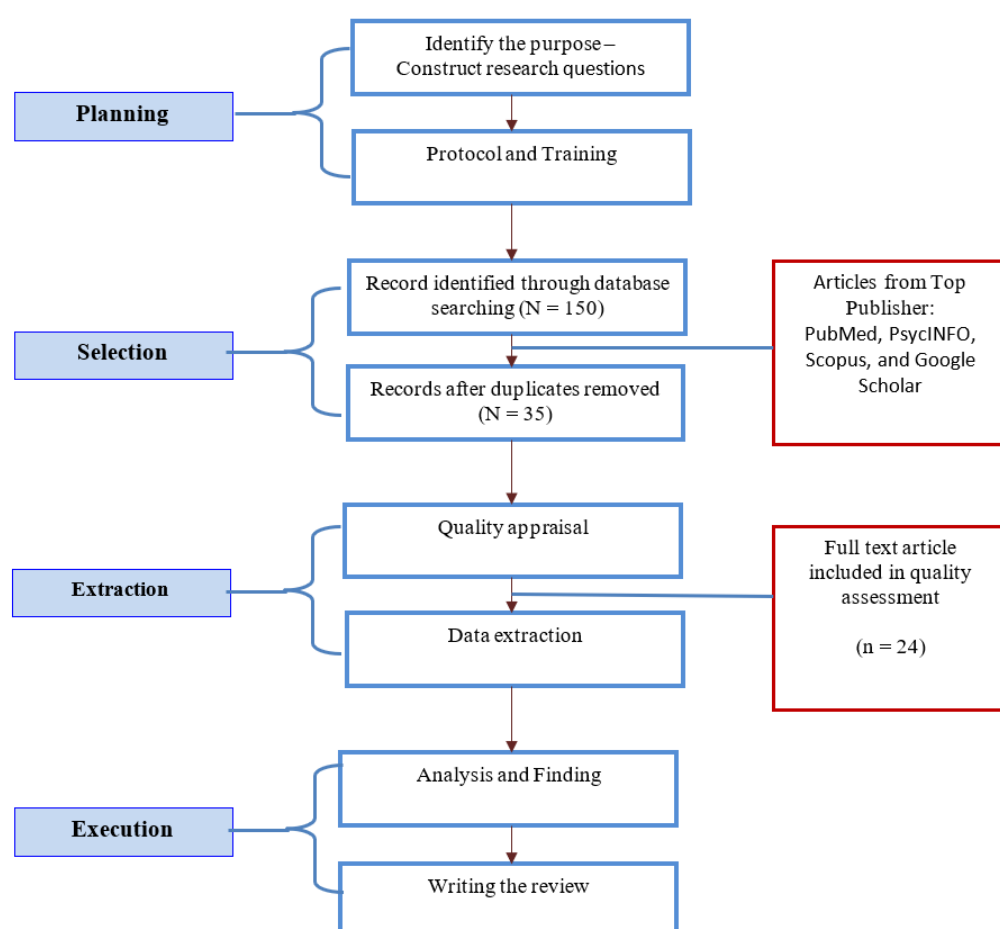


Figure 1: The SLR process: adapted from Okoli and Schabram.²⁴

Table 1: Identified occupational stressors and associated mental health consequences in the Niger Delta region.

Primary stressors identified	Consequences
Environmental degradation like oil spillage	Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, reduced efficiency
Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment and inequality	Depression, anxiety, frustration, resentments
Occupational hazards	Burnout, accident, anxiety
Disconnected capitalism	powerlessness and marginalization, resentment, frustration, financial instability and chronic stress

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the reviewed literature, summarized in Table 1, reveals a complex and interconnected web of stressors significantly impacting the occupational mental health landscape of the Niger Delta region.

These findings underscore the profound influence of environmental degradation, socioeconomic disparities, the inherent hazards of the oil and gas industry and the overarching framework of "disconnected capitalism" on the psychological well-being of both workers and the wider communities.

Primary occupational stressors and their mental health consequences

Environmental degradation and psychological distress

The consistent link between environmental degradation, particularly oil spillage and significant psychological distress is a critical finding. Exposure to pollution and the disruption of traditional livelihoods due to oil spills are associated with elevated rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).^{9,25}

This highlights that the environmental repercussions of the dominant oil industry have far-reaching consequences

for mental health, extending beyond immediate physical and economic impacts to affect the core identity and sustenance of the population.

Socioeconomic disparities and mental health burden

Socioeconomic factors, including pervasive poverty, high unemployment rates and stark inequality, emerge as major contributors to negative mental health outcomes. The literature suggests that the paradox of significant oil wealth coexisting with widespread deprivation in the Niger Delta fosters significant levels of depression, anxiety, frustration and resentment.^{4,12} The perceived inequitable distribution of resources further exacerbates these negative emotions, creating a breeding ground for chronic stress and psychological distress.¹⁴

Occupational hazards in the oil and gas industry

The inherent dangers and demands of the oil and gas industry present direct threats to the mental health of its workforce. The demanding and often hazardous working conditions, exposure to toxic substances and the psychological toll of prolonged separation from families are linked to increased rates of burnout, a heightened risk of traumatizing accidents and general anxiety among oil and gas workers.^{16,17} This underscores the urgent need for stringent safety protocols and comprehensive mental health support systems tailored to the specific challenges of this industry.

"Disconnected Capitalism" as a systemic stressor

The framework of "disconnected capitalism" illuminates a significant overarching stressor in the Niger Delta.

The concentration of benefits from the oil industry within a select elite, while the majority experiences marginalization and exploitation, fosters a sense of powerlessness, resentment, frustration and chronic stress stemming from precarious employment and economic instability.^{2,18} This systemic inequality and perceived injustice are critical factors undermining the mental health of individuals and communities reliant on or affected by the resource extraction industry.

Limitations in mental health service availability and accessibility

The reviewed literature consistently points to the inadequacy of mental health services within the Niger Delta region. Limited access to qualified mental health professionals and facilities, compounded by the pervasive cultural stigma associated with mental illness, creates significant barriers to individuals seeking and receiving necessary support.¹⁹

This lack of accessible and culturally sensitive mental health care further exacerbates the existing mental health challenges within the population.

Proposed interventions

Addressing the multifaceted occupational mental health challenges in the Niger Delta necessitates a comprehensive and context-specific approach. The literature proposes several key intervention strategies.

Improving access to mental health services

This includes increasing the number of mental health professionals and facilities, integrating mental health care into primary healthcare systems and actively working to reduce cultural stigma surrounding mental illness.²⁰

Environmental remediation

Addressing the extensive environmental damage caused by oil extraction is crucial for improving the overall well-being of affected communities. This requires the implementation and strict enforcement of regulations on oil companies, comprehensive cleanup of contaminated sites and support for sustainable alternative livelihoods.¹⁰

Economic development and diversification

Reducing poverty and unemployment through targeted job creation initiatives and the diversification of the regional economy can help alleviate the significant socioeconomic stressors that contribute to poor mental health.¹¹

Community empowerment and participation

Empowering local communities to actively participate in decision-making processes related to resource management and development can help mitigate feelings of powerlessness and social alienation.¹⁴

Workplace interventions

Implementing comprehensive workplace wellness programs, providing accessible mental health support services for employees within the oil and gas industry and fostering healthy work environments are crucial steps in reducing occupational stress.¹⁶

Addressing "disconnected capitalism"

Implementing policies and interventions aimed at ensuring a more equitable distribution of the benefits derived from the oil industry is paramount. This includes measures such as increasing the share of oil revenues allocated to local communities, holding oil companies accountable for environmental damage, promoting local employment and skills development within the sector and supporting the growth of sustainable alternative livelihoods for those impacted by the oil industry.

The occupational mental health challenges in the Niger Delta are significant and deeply rooted in a complex

interplay of environmental, socioeconomic, industrial and systemic factors. Addressing this requires a concerted effort involving government agencies, oil companies, community organizations and mental health professionals to implement comprehensive and culturally sensitive interventions that tackle both the immediate stressors and the underlying systemic issues.

CONCLUSION

Occupational mental health in Nigeria's Niger Delta is critically undermined by interconnected stressors: environmental degradation, socioeconomic disparities, oil and gas industry hazards and "disconnected capitalism." These factors collectively contribute to high rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD and burnout, compounded by severely limited access to mental health services. Addressing this complex crisis requires comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions.

Recommendations

We strongly recommend significantly improving access to and integration of mental health services into primary care, coupled with public campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. It's also vital to prioritize environmental cleanup and support for sustainable alternative livelihoods. Furthermore, fostering equitable economic development, empowering local communities in decision-making and implementing robust workplace wellness programs within the oil and gas sector are essential. Ultimately, systemic policy changes are needed to ensure a fairer distribution of oil wealth and hold corporations accountable, thereby alleviating the profound negative effects of "disconnected capitalism" on the region's occupational mental health.

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