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Psychological Dynamics in Incarcerated Amphetamine Dependence: An Interpretive Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Substance dependence among inmates presents complex psychological challenges often rooted in personal history and environmental factors.

Objectives: This study aims to identify and analyze the specific psychological dynamics of an inmate diagnosed with amphetamine dependence to provide a basis for effective intervention.

Method: This study utilized a qualitative case study approach involving "IK," a 25-year-old male inmate at Penitentiary X with a history of early-onset substance abuse. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and psychological assessments, including Graphic Tests (BAUM, DAP, HTP), SPM, Wartegg, and TAT. The subject presented with severe anxiety, moderate depression, and profound feelings of guilt and inferiority, exacerbated by a history of parental divorce and the loss of his partner and child during incarceration.

Results: The analysis reveals that the subject's amphetamine dependence functions as a maladaptive coping mechanism stemming from a dysfunctional family history and childhood trauma. The prison environment has further intensified his psychological distress, particularly anxiety and internal conflict regarding his inability to take responsibility. Despite possessing average intelligence, the subject exhibits emotional repression and a low fighting spirit, which are critical factors influencing his recovery potential.

Conclusion: The psychological dynamics of inmates with amphetamine dependence are deeply intertwined with past traumatic experiences and unsupportive environments. Understanding these underlying factors is crucial for correctional facilities and mental health practitioners to design personalized rehabilitation programs that address not only the addiction but also the root psychological vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Psychological dynamics, Inmate, Amphetamine dependence

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INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse and dependence, particularly involving narcotics, are critical global issues that exert severe impacts on individuals, families, and broader society. In Indonesia, the complexity of this problem is underscored by the high volume of inmates incarcerated for drug-related offenses. These individuals face not only legal repercussions but also profound psychological struggles characterized by isolation, social stigma, and deep-seated regret. Substance dependence is clinically defined as a maladaptive pattern of substance use that leads to significant impairment or distress, often manifesting through tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, and persistent use despite known physical or psychological harm (American Psychiatric Association [DSM-IV-TR], 2000).

Furthermore, addiction is recognized as a chronic, relapsing brain disease marked by compulsive drug-seeking behavior and use regardless of the damaging consequences (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2014). The psychological dynamics underlying substance dependence frequently involve predisposing factors such as dysfunctional family histories, childhood trauma, and inherent psychological vulnerability. While the prison environment is theoretically intended for rehabilitation, it can paradoxically worsen an inmate's psychological state in the absence of targeted interventions. Manifestations such as guilt, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem are prevalent among inmates, particularly those with a history of substance use beginning at an early age. Research indicates that a dysfunctional family history and a lack of parental supervision serve as potent predictors of substance abuse behavior (Ramadhan & Darwis, 2023).

These findings are consistent with the understanding that childhood traumatic experiences, including abuse or neglect, significantly heighten an individual's vulnerability to substance dependence as a primary coping mechanism (McKetin et al., 2019). Within the correctional context, the detention environment can further deteriorate the psychological well-being of individuals struggling with dependence. Stress induced by isolation, loss of autonomy, and pervasive social stigma often triggers intensified symptoms of anxiety and depression, thereby obstructing the recovery process (Atmojo & Pangestuti, 2023).

Inmates dependent on amphetamines specifically often exhibit dysfunctional thought patterns, including pervasive feelings of worthlessness, pessimism regarding the future, and significant deficits in emotional regulation (Stellern et al., 2022). Amphetamine dependence is unique due to the neurochemical changes it induces in the brain's reward system, which creates an overwhelming urge to continue use despite awareness of the negative outcomes (Guterstam et al., 2013). The withdrawal symptoms associated with amphetamines—such as severe depression, extreme fatigue, and anhedonia—are exceptionally challenging and frequently lead to relapse. Indeed, data suggests that approximately 59% of individuals who complete rehabilitation are likely to relapse within one year of treatment (Kabisa et al., 2021).

An in-depth understanding of these psychological dynamics, especially within the context of incarceration, is essential for the design of effective therapeutic interventions. The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the psychological dynamics of inmates experiencing amphetamine dependence. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these complex internal processes to serve as a foundation for developing more effective rehabilitation programs in correctional facilities. Ultimately, these insights will assist psychology and mental health practitioners in designing personalized and relevant interventions for this specific population.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the intricate psychological dynamics of an inmate with amphetamine dependence. A case study design was selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth exploration of complex,

individual phenomena within a real-life context. This methodology allows for a profound understanding of the subject's unique experiences, the multifaceted factors influencing his addiction, and the subjective meanings he attributes to his current condition.

Participants

The primary subject is a 25-year-old male inmate, identified by the initials IK, currently incarcerated at Penitentiary X. IK is unmarried, an only child, and has been clinically diagnosed with amphetamine dependence. Notably, his history of addictive substance use dates back to early childhood, indicating a long-term struggle with dependency. The participant was selected based on specific purposive inclusion criteria: (1) current status as an inmate in a correctional facility, (2) a formal diagnosis of substance dependence, and (3) a voluntary commitment to participate in the research process.

Data Collection

To ensure a rigorous and holistic assessment, the researcher utilized a combination of qualitative inquiry and standardized psychometric instruments. This multi-method approach facilitates data triangulation and enhances the validity of the findings. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore IK's life history, the chronology of his substance use, and his personal perceptions of the challenges faced within the prison environment. The researcher observed IK's non-verbal cues, affective displays, and behavioral patterns during interactions to identify underlying psychological distress and defense mechanisms. A comprehensive set of diagnostic tools was administered, including: The Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) to assess non-verbal intellectual capacity and ensure cognitive clarity during reporting. The Wartegg Test and Graphical Tests (such as Draw-A-Person and House-Tree-Person) were utilized to explore personality structure and subconscious conflicts. The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was employed to uncover dominant drives, emotions, and core relational conflicts through the subject's responses to ambiguous social situations..

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with strict adherence to psychological and institutional ethical standards. Prior to engagement, the participant was provided with informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, procedures, potential psychological risks, and the benefits of his participation. To protect the participant's rights, his identity was anonymized through the use of initials, and he was informed of his right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions from the correctional facility. The researcher prioritized the participant's mental well-being, ensuring that the assessment process was conducted in a supportive manner to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.

RESULTS

The findings of this clinical assessment and psychometric evaluation delineate a complex interplay between developmental trauma, early-onset substance use, and the acute psychological distress induced by incarceration.

Participant Life History and Social Background

IK is a 25-year-old male whose life has been characterized by significant familial instability and emotional neglect from an early age. Following his parents' divorce when he was one year old, he was raised primarily by his grandparents while his mother worked abroad in Abu Dhabi. His father, who established a new family, provided neither financial support nor emotional presence, leaving IK with profound feelings of rejection and a lack of social acknowledgment. This paternal absence appears to be a foundational "attachment wound," creating a lifelong deficit in his need for masculine validation and stable affection.

Progression of Substance Dependence

IK's trajectory of substance use began exceptionally early, indicating a significant lack of environmental supervision and high psychological vulnerability during his developmental years. His history reveals a progressive escalation of dependency, beginning in the 3rd grade with cigarette smoking and advancing to marijuana use by the 5th grade through peer influence. By junior high school, he had transitioned to the non-prescribed use of tranquilizers, eventually initiating crystal methamphetamine use during his high school years. Upon moving to Bali for work as a collector and security guard, IK became a drug courier, a role that ultimately led to his current sentence of 4 years and 2 months. The continuity of this behavior suggests that substances served as a primary, albeit maladaptive, coping mechanism for his underlying childhood trauma and isolation.

Current Psychological Symptomatology

IK currently presents with severe clinical distress marked by intense grief, anxiety, and a notable sense of moral injury. The discovery of his girlfriend's pregnancy while he was incarcerated, followed by her subsequent abandonment and the adoption of their child by a third party, has triggered a profound psychological crisis. He expressed overwhelming feelings of sinfulness, shame, and worthlessness, particularly regarding his perceived failure to fulfill a responsible paternal role. Based on the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS), anxiety is IK's most dominant emotional challenge, characterized by a persistent awareness of his precarious situation and a desperate desire for his psychological distress to end. His emotional instability is most visible when observing other inmates being visited, which frequently triggers acute episodes of isolation and weeping.

Psychometric and Projective Interpretation

The integration of multiple psychological assessments provides a consistent clinical profile of IK's personality dynamics and subconscious state. Graphical tests, including the BAUM, DAP, and HTP, consistently revealed profound feelings of guilt, inferiority, and a marked lack of self-confidence, with indicators suggesting significant childhood trauma and a subconscious tendency to avoid distressing memories. Furthermore, these assessments highlighted a closer attachment to his mother but emphasized a prominent, unfulfilled need for attention from his absent father. Collectively, the test results suggest that IK exhibits significant difficulties in environmental adaptation, indicating that his psychological defenses are fragile and easily overwhelmed by the chronic stressors of the penitentiary environment.

DISCUSSION

The psychological dynamics observed in the case of IK are profoundly complex and align with established theoretical frameworks regarding the etiology of substance dependence. His trajectory suggests that predisposing factors, specifically a dysfunctional family history and significant emotional neglect during critical developmental stages, served as the primary drivers of his psychological vulnerability. The lack of paternal acknowledgment and the absence of a stable domestic environment likely forced IK to adopt substance use as a maladaptive coping mechanism to numb feelings of rejection. This is consistent with the findings of Ramadhan and Darwis (2023), who established a direct correlation between family dysfunction and increased drug abuse risk, as well as the research of McKetin et al. (2019), which underscores childhood trauma as a major predictor for lifelong substance dependence.

IK's psychological state was further compromised by the cumulative trauma of his current incarceration and the devastating loss of his familial ties. The discovery that his girlfriend was pregnant, followed by her subsequent abandonment and the adoption of their child, has induced a state of "moral injury" and profound guilt. This internal conflict is exacerbated by the prison environment itself; as noted by Atmojo and Pangestuti (2023), the isolation and social stigma inherent in detention often heighten stress levels and can severely hinder the psychological recovery of inmates. His acute anxiety is a direct manifestation of this environmental pressure, coupled with a deep-seated desire to rectify his past mistakes despite his current lack of agency.

From a psychometric perspective, while IK possesses average intelligence—suggesting the cognitive capacity to engage in therapeutic work—his personality structure presents significant barriers to rehabilitation. His profile is characterized by a low "fighting spirit" and a marked tendency to repress emotions, which likely stems from years of avoiding childhood trauma. This repressive defense mechanism may lead to a superficial compliance with prison programs while leaving the underlying emotional wounds unaddressed. Furthermore, his profound feelings of inferiority and need for paternal validation suggest that a successful intervention must move beyond simple behavioral modification to address his core attachment deficits and self-concept.

CONCLUSION

The psychological dynamics of inmate IK delineate a complex narrative of amphetamine dependence rooted in chronic developmental trauma and exacerbated by the acute stressors of the correctional system. He exhibits severe clinical symptoms, including intense anxiety, moderate depression, and a pervasive sense of guilt that stems from his perceived failure as a father and son. His personality is defined by high levels of self-doubt and an unfulfilled need for affection, which complicates his path to recovery. While his cognitive abilities are intact, his low resilience and tendency toward emotional repression necessitate a highly personalized, trauma-informed approach to rehabilitation that prioritizes emotional regulation and the repair of his self-identity.



CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors stated there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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