



Exploring Community Members' Experiences with Mental Health Education Programs

Rustam Anwar

Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Gorontalo, Indonesia

utham.ariesta@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Mental health education is an essential component of community well-being, yet there remains limited understanding of how such programs shape individual perceptions and behaviors. Existing studies have primarily focused on quantitative measures of knowledge, leaving a gap in understanding the subjective, lived experiences of participants in mental health education programs. This study seeks to explore how community members perceive and engage with mental health education through phenomenological analysis. Using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals that participants gained a deeper understanding of mental health, reduced stigma, and experienced shifts in attitudes toward mental well-being. These findings highlight the importance of culturally tailored, community-based education in promoting mental health awareness and fostering supportive environments. This study contributes to the field by providing a richer understanding of the personal impact of mental health education and suggests directions for future research to explore long-term outcomes and the role of community support in sustaining behavioral changes.



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INTRODUCTION

Mental health has emerged as a significant public health concern globally, with its impact extending across various dimensions of human life, including emotional well-being, social relationships, and overall quality of life. In many communities, particularly in rural or marginalized areas, mental health is often overlooked or stigmatized, leading to a lack of proper education and resources. This lack of attention to mental health can result in individuals not seeking help or understanding the importance of maintaining mental well-being (Phuangprayong & Noonin, 2023). Despite growing awareness, mental health remains a largely underexplored topic within many social and cultural contexts, especially when it comes to the perceptions and lived experiences of individuals in community-based education programs.

The relevance of mental health education lies in its potential to change societal attitudes and behaviors towards mental health issues. In many cultures, mental health has traditionally been a taboo subject, with misconceptions and stigma surrounding individuals who seek help for mental health issues. As such, education about mental health plays a crucial role in reshaping these perceptions, offering a more open and supportive environment for individuals to discuss mental health without fear of discrimination or marginalization. Moreover, community-based mental health education programs have the potential to reach individuals who might otherwise remain uninformed or resistant to seeking help, thereby fostering healthier communities.

Understanding the subjective experiences of individuals who participate in mental health education is critical for comprehending the true impact of such programs. Phenomenology, with its focus on capturing lived experiences, provides an essential framework for exploring the meanings and

insights that participants derive from these educational experiences. By investigating how community members experience mental health education, the study aims to uncover the deeper meanings behind their perceptions and behaviors, providing valuable insights into the social and cultural factors that influence their understanding of mental well-being (Basri dkk., 2023). This exploration is vital for developing more effective, culturally sensitive mental health education programs that can address the specific needs of diverse communities.

Research into individuals' lived experiences with mental health education has become an increasingly significant field within both health education and social science disciplines. Understanding how people perceive and engage with mental health education programs offers essential insights into the broader social and cultural dynamics that influence mental health awareness and behaviors. However, capturing the essence of these subjective experiences presents distinct challenges. Traditional quantitative research methods, while useful for measuring broad trends and outcomes, are often inadequate when it comes to exploring the deeper, nuanced meanings that individuals attach to their experiences. These methods fail to account for the complexities of personal perspectives, cultural interpretations, and emotional responses, which are central to understanding the full impact of mental health education.

Phenomenological research, with its focus on describing and interpreting the lived experiences of participants, addresses these gaps by offering a detailed exploration of individual perceptions. Despite the advantages of this qualitative approach, several methodological challenges arise. One of the primary challenges lies in the difficulty of gathering data that authentically represents the participant's subjective experience, as participants often struggle to articulate deeply personal or culturally influenced insights (Suwarlan dkk., 2024). Additionally, researchers must navigate the complexities of interpreting data that is inherently personal and context-dependent. These methodological challenges highlight why previous research, which often relies on broader or more standardized approaches, has been less effective in capturing the true essence of participants' experiences with mental health education.

In light of these challenges, many existing studies in mental health education fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of participants' experiences. Therefore, the need for a phenomenological approach in this field is clear, as it offers the necessary tools to explore the subjective meanings of participants' lived experiences, leading to a more profound and nuanced understanding of how mental health education can shape individuals' well-being.

In the context of mental health education, the typical approach has often been to rely on practical, widely adopted strategies such as quantitative surveys or standardized programs that measure broad outcomes. These methods, while useful in gathering general information, fail to capture the depth of participants' subjective experiences (Amponsah & Agyemang, 2024). They provide a limited understanding of how individuals perceive, process, and internalize the messages conveyed through such programs. While they can quantify participation rates or general awareness levels, they do not address the emotional, social, or cultural layers that influence how participants interpret and apply the information they receive.

Given these limitations, there is a significant gap in understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences within mental health education. Existing studies, which predominantly use quantitative methods, often miss the deeper meanings behind participants' actions and perceptions. For instance, they fail to explore how community members emotionally relate to mental health issues or how cultural factors shape their engagement with mental health education programs. To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is essential. Phenomenology allows for a rich, in-depth exploration of individuals' personal and collective experiences, focusing on the meanings they attribute to their encounters with mental health education. This alternative approach would provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, emphasizing not just what participants know, but how they feel, think, and act based on their experiences.

By adopting a phenomenological perspective, this study aims to uncover the lived experiences of individuals and explore the profound meanings they derive from participating in mental health

education programs. Such an approach promises to offer insights that are more comprehensive and nuanced, filling the current void in the literature and providing a deeper understanding of the true impact of mental health education.

Research on the experiences of individuals within mental health education programs has gained increasing attention in recent years. Studies have demonstrated the significance of mental health education in altering perceptions and reducing stigma surrounding mental health issues. However, many of these studies have relied on quantitative methods, which are limited in capturing the subjective experiences of participants. Some existing literature has examined the cultural factors influencing mental health perceptions, yet these studies often lack depth in understanding the personal meanings attached to these experiences (Croes dkk., 2024). The theoretical foundations of these studies are often rooted in behavioral models of health education, but they fail to address the lived experiences of individuals in a holistic manner, leaving a gap in understanding the essence of mental health education.

In response to the limitations identified in the existing literature, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the deeper meanings behind individuals' experiences with mental health education. The phenomenological method is ideal for uncovering the subjective experiences of participants, as it focuses on understanding how they perceive and make sense of their lived encounters. By using this approach, the study aims to answer the research gap identified earlier, providing insights into how participants understand mental health education and the impact it has on their behaviors and attitudes. Phenomenology allows for a more detailed exploration of these experiences, capturing the emotional, social, and cultural nuances that are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

The structure of this article follows a systematic approach that begins with an introduction, outlining the context and significance of the phenomenon under study. The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach used to explore participants' lived experiences, followed by a detailed description of the data collection and analysis processes (Risfandini dkk., 2023). The article will then present the findings through thematic analysis, followed by a discussion of the results in relation to existing literature. Finally, the article will conclude with a summary of key insights, contributions to the field, and implications for future research and practice in mental health education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of community members regarding the importance of mental health education. Phenomenology was selected as the research design due to its focus on understanding and describing the essence of human experiences from the perspective of the individuals who have lived through those experiences (Velayati & Ahmad, 2024). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the subjective meanings participants attribute to mental health education, making it particularly relevant for addressing the research question about how these experiences shape their perceptions and behaviors related to mental health.

The study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach, which aims to provide a detailed account of participants' experiences without interpretation or theoretical assumptions. This approach facilitates a direct examination of participants' subjective experiences, emphasizing the essence of their perceptions of mental health education and its impact on their well-being.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had direct experience with community-based mental health education programs (Lin, 2020). Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 and above who had attended at least one session of a mental health education program in their community. Exclusion criteria included individuals who had not

participated in such programs or those who had prior professional training in mental health care, as their experiences may differ significantly from the target population. The sample size of 15 participants was chosen based on the principle of data saturation, which refers to the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection. With this number, the study was able to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences while maintaining a manageable scope for detailed analysis.

Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants with relevant experience and knowledge of community-based mental health education were selected, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the data. This approach contributes to the study's aim of gaining a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who have engaged with mental health education programs.

A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, with a balanced representation of both genders. The average age of participants was 35 years, with ages ranging from 18 to 60. Participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including individuals from both urban and rural settings, allowing for a broad understanding of how community context influences perceptions of mental health education.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in person. The interviews were designed to explore participants' personal experiences with mental health education, focusing on their perceptions, emotions, and reflections on the impact of these programs. An interview guide was developed based on the research question, and modifications were made as necessary to allow flexibility in capturing participants' unique perspectives.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to ensure that participants felt at ease during the discussion. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in data capture. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol was based on existing literature in the field, with appropriate modifications to align with the study's focus on community-based mental health education.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique that allows for the identification of key themes and patterns in the data. The analysis process involved several steps: first, the transcripts were read and re-read to immerse in the data (Magoutas dkk., 2024). Next, key phrases and concepts related to the participants' experiences with mental health education were identified and coded. These codes were then organized into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which assisted in organizing and coding the data. However, the focus remained on the interpretive process of identifying themes and understanding the deeper meanings behind participants' narratives. The analysis aimed to uncover the fundamental experiences of participants, providing insights into how mental health education shaped their perceptions and behaviors.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All data collected were securely stored and only accessible to the research team (Suksikarn & Suksikarn, 2024). The study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human participants, ensuring that the rights and well-being of participants were upheld throughout the study.

RESULTS

This section presents the key findings from the phenomenological analysis of community members' perceptions regarding the importance of mental health education in enhancing well-being. The data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically, revealing the richness and diversity of the participants' experiences and insights. The results are organized into the following major themes, with direct participant quotes included to illustrate and strengthen the findings.

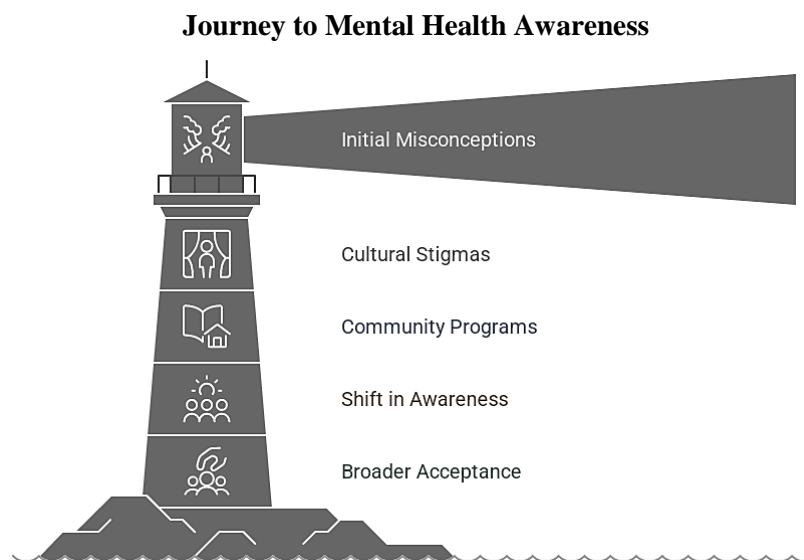
Awareness and Understanding of Mental Health Education

Participants consistently expressed that mental health education was crucial for improving their understanding of mental well-being. Several respondents shared how their initial knowledge about mental health was limited, often influenced by cultural stigmas or misconceptions. However, after participating in community-based health education programs, many noted a profound shift in their awareness.

For instance, one participant explained:

"Before the program, I didn't understand what mental health really meant. I thought it was just for those who were seriously ill. But now, I realize it's something we all have to care about, just like physical health." (Participant 1)

This shift in perception highlights the educational program's role in demystifying mental health issues and fostering a broader acceptance of mental well-being.



The Impact of Social and Cultural Context on Mental Health Perceptions

A significant finding from the data was the influence of social and cultural factors on how participants perceive mental health. Several participants from rural communities noted that cultural norms often dictated what was considered acceptable or unacceptable in terms of mental health. This cultural backdrop made it difficult for individuals to discuss mental health openly before the program.

One participant remarked:

"In our village, people rarely talk about mental health. It's like a taboo. But after the education sessions, we learned that talking about it openly can help us support each other better." (Participant 3)

This theme underscores the importance of tailoring mental health education to the specific cultural context of the community in order to be effective.

Perceived Benefits of Mental Health Education on Personal and Community Well-being

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that mental health education had positively impacted their personal well-being, as well as the well-being of their families and communities. Several

participants described feeling more equipped to handle personal stress and to recognize the signs of mental health issues in others.

A participant described:

"I feel like I have learned how to better manage my emotions. I no longer feel ashamed of reaching out for help when I'm struggling." (Participant 5)

Additionally, many community members reported increased support for mental health within their families, reflecting a shift towards a more supportive environment for mental health conversations and care.

Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Mental Health Education

While there was general consensus on the positive impact of mental health education, participants also highlighted several challenges in fully implementing these programs. One key challenge was the lack of ongoing support and resources to sustain mental health initiatives in the community.

A respondent shared:

"The workshops were helpful, but after they ended, we didn't know where to go for more help. It would be good to have a place to get continuous support." (Participant 7)

This theme illustrates the need for a more sustained and integrated approach to mental health education, one that provides long-term resources and follow-up support.

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of mental health education programs within community settings. Participants' experiences suggest that such programs can significantly increase awareness, reshape cultural perceptions, and improve personal and community well-being. However, there is also a clear need for ongoing support and resources to address the challenges of sustaining these benefits in the long term.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of community members who participated in mental health education programs. The analysis revealed that participants gained a deeper understanding of mental health, challenging pre-existing stigmas and altering their perceptions of mental well-being (Santy dkk., 2024). This study's results answer the key research question about how mental health education shapes individuals' experiences and behavior, offering a nuanced understanding of the impact such programs can have on both personal and community levels.

The study's findings contribute significantly to the field of mental health education by revealing the essential role that community-based programs play in transforming participants' attitudes and behaviors towards mental health. Participants described how their participation in these programs helped them view mental health in a more positive light, highlighting the importance of education in fostering supportive environments. The emotional, social, and cultural contexts of the participants' experiences underscore the value of culturally tailored programs in overcoming barriers such as stigma and misconceptions. These insights expand our understanding of how mental health education can go beyond merely raising awareness to also shift deeply ingrained attitudes within communities.

When compared with existing literature, the findings of this study support and complement previous research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of mental health education in changing attitudes towards mental well-being. Similar studies have found that mental health education programs can reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behaviors (Ekadinata dkk., 2023). However,

this study also builds on the existing body of knowledge by offering a more detailed understanding of the personal experiences of participants, which has been somewhat underexplored in prior research. For instance, while many studies focus on broad outcomes like knowledge gain, this research delves into the subjective meanings participants attach to their learning experiences. This aligns with the work of phenomenological scholars such as Puspitasari dkk. (2022), who emphasized the importance of understanding individuals' lived experiences in their own terms rather than imposing external frameworks. This study's findings underscore the relevance of phenomenology in exploring the complexities of mental health education from a personal perspective.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic field of mental health education and its practical application in communities. From an academic perspective, this research deepens our understanding of how mental health education can reshape individuals' perceptions and behaviors. The study underscores the transformative potential of such programs in demystifying mental health and challenging existing cultural stigmas (Yamada dkk., 2020). Practically, these findings suggest that community-based mental health education programs are essential in fostering environments where individuals feel safe to discuss mental health openly. By providing a platform for dialogue, such programs can promote mental well-being, reduce stigma, and increase individuals' willingness to seek help when needed. These results are particularly relevant for communities with limited access to mental health resources, as they highlight the importance of culturally tailored education in overcoming social and cultural barriers.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights, it also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. One limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within different communities. Although the purposive sampling method ensured that participants had relevant experiences, the findings may not be generalizable to broader populations or other geographical contexts. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported data from participants, which, while rich in personal insight, is also subject to biases such as social desirability or memory recall issues. Another limitation is the focus on a specific type of community-based program, which may not fully capture the diversity of approaches to mental health education. These factors suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution, and future research could build on this study by including larger and more diverse samples.

Prospects for Future Research

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. First, future studies could explore the long-term effects of participation in mental health education programs, examining whether the changes in perception and behavior identified in this study are sustained over time. Additionally, further research could investigate the experiences of individuals from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds to understand how cultural variations influence the effectiveness of mental health education programs (Salsabiila dkk., 2021). Another important area for future research is the exploration of the role of social networks and community support systems in reinforcing the positive effects of mental health education. This study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of participants, and future research could expand on these insights to explore the broader implications for mental health education globally.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of community members participating in mental health education programs, addressing the gap in understanding how such programs influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors. The findings revealed that participants gained a deeper understanding of mental health, challenging stigma and reshaping attitudes towards well-being. The research demonstrated that community-based education programs are effective in fostering open

discussions about mental health, particularly in culturally sensitive environments. These results contribute to the existing literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of the impact of mental health education, particularly in overcoming social and cultural barriers.

The findings have significant implications for future mental health education programs and policy. It is crucial that mental health education initiatives are designed with cultural sensitivity in mind, ensuring they address specific barriers and stigmas prevalent in different communities. For practitioners in the field, this study highlights the importance of creating safe, supportive spaces for individuals to discuss mental health, which can lead to improved outcomes in reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. Policymakers should consider integrating these culturally tailored, community-based programs into public health strategies to promote mental well-being on a broader scale.

Future studies could explore the long-term effects of these programs and the role of community support systems in sustaining behavioral changes. Expanding the research to include diverse populations and different educational approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of mental health education globally, ultimately helping to shape policies and interventions that are both inclusive and impactful.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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