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## Psychological help-seeking: role of socio-demographic variables, previous help-seeking experience and presence of a problem

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### Abstract

This study aimed at understanding the role of socio-demographic variables, previous experience of seeking professional help, and presence of a problem on the help-seeking attitudes of university students. Undergraduate students selected from a Turkish urban university completed The Attitudes toward Seeking Psychological Help-Shortened (Türküm, 2004), and a demographic information form. The Multivariate Analyses of Variances showed that gender, age, education level of parents, living arrangement, and presence of a problem were significantly associated with help-seeking attitudes.

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*Keywords:* Help-seeking attitudes, demographic variables, university students, Turkish culture, counseling in higher education.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, university policies have emphasized improving the mental health of students in order to assist them in coping with the stressors brought by transition to university. According to developmental theories (e.g., Chikering & Havighurst, 1981; Erikson, 1968), the challenges that university students have to face are great in variety and include search for identity and independence, choice of career, and establishing close and intimate relationships. In support of this, many problem areas of students have been identified such as academic and vocational difficulties (Bishop, Bauer, & Becker, 1998), relationship problems (Chandler & Gallagher, 1996); as well as anxiety, eating disorders and substance use (Gallagher, Sysko, & Zhang, 2001; Heppner, Kivlighan, Good, Roehlke, Hills, & Ashby, 1994).

Despite the severity and variety of problems university students are confronted with, a service gap exists between students and counselling services. That is, young people are reluctant to seek help, especially from formal sources such as counsellors and psychologists (Boldero & Fallon, 1995). However, help-seeking is an aspect of active coping and is effective in addressing stressors when the individuals are not satisfied with their own resources to solve the problem. Thus, young people should be able to seek both professional and non-professional help in order

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to successfully cope with the developmental tasks and to make a healthy transition to adulthood (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996).

Several correlates of help-seeking attitudes have been found by researchers. Among these are demographic variables including gender, age and income. For instance, a consistent finding in the literature is that females have more positive attitudes toward seeking psychological help than males (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This willingness among women to seek professional help has been attributed to the tendency of women to have closer friendships and of being socialized toward providing help (Garland & Zigler, 1994). In addition, females perceive counselling as more positive, and thus, are more willing to seek out and use outside resources more than males (Kushner & Sher, 1991). Research also showed that the coping strategies used to deal with a particular stressor tend to change as one matures and gets older. While, young adolescents are more willing to seek help from informal sources such as close friends when they have a problem; older adolescents are more likely to consult a professional and have more positive help-seeking attitudes (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). This is partly a result of the increased level of knowledge about mental health resources among older individuals, as well as their developed coping strategies (Kliwer, Lepore, Broquet, & Zuba, 1990). Other demographic variables found to be associated with help-seeking are income (Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman, & Blum, 1994), and education level (Leaf, Bruce, Tischler, & Holzer, 1987).

Young people who had a previous help-seeking experience are generally more willing to seek help in the future (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). There may be fewer barriers to seeking psychological help for these people, especially if the experience has been a successful one. In addition, whether the person has a particular problem to be addressed may be related to the attitudes toward help-seeking. Previous research showed that presence of distress makes a difference in help-seeking attitudes (Ingham & Miller, 1986).

In Turkey, there is a growing need for counselling services in universities as a result of the variety of students' problem areas (Güneri, Aydın, & Skovholt, 2003). However, counseling services are still underutilized. A majority of university students reported that they did not perceive seeking professional help as a way of resolving their problems (Koydemir & Demir, 2005). However, not much is known about why Turkish university students are reluctant to seek professional help. Understanding the factors important in help-seeking attitudes of university students may aid the university administration and practitioners design and deliver appropriate support and counseling services.

The present study aimed at understanding the relationship between help-seeking attitudes of university students and several socio-demographic variables including gender, age, living arrangement, place grown up, and education level of parents; as well as previous experience of seeking professional help and presence of a problem.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Sample*

Undergraduate students enrolled in a 4-year program at a university in Istanbul participated at the study. Sample consisted of 398 students (253 females, 145 males). Demographic characteristics of the sample are displayed in Table 1.

### *2.2. Data Collection*

The Attitudes toward Seeking Psychological Help-Shortened (Türküm, 2004) was used to assess the help-seeking attitudes of students. This is the shortened version of the original ASPH (Türküm, 2005). It is an 18-item scale for which the participants are asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly agree" to "5 = strongly disagree". Higher scores from the scale indicate positive attitudes towards seeking psychological help. Two more scores can also be obtained from the scale: positive attitudes toward help-seeking and negative attitudes toward help-seeking. The scale was reported to be a reliable and valid tool in measuring help-seeking attitudes among university students.

A detailed information form was also developed and used by the researchers. First, information regarding gender, age, living arrangement, education level of mother and father, income and major was asked. Students were also

asked to indicate whether they had previous psychological help-seeking experience; and whether they had a problem that needed professional help at the time of data collection.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristics	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	17	61.4
Female	28	35.2
Age		
17-19	81	19.7
20-23	188	45.6
24-28	127	30.8
Place Grown Up		
Metropolitan	227	55.1
City	121	29.4
Town/village	45	10.9
Living Arrangement		
Campus dormitory	97	23.5
Alone	33	8.0
With friends	42	10.2
With family	182	44.2
With relatives	43	10.4
Father Education		
Elementary	52	12.6
Secondary	40	9.7
High	173	29.9
University and above	171	41.5
Mother Education		
Elementary	105	25.5
Secondary	46	11.2
High	138	33
University and above	178	18.9
Presence of a current problem		
Yes	201	51.2
No	197	48.7
Previous help-seeking		
Yes	103	26.2
No	273	69.1

### 2.3. Procedure

Students were recruited using purposeful sampling. They received the instruments in regular class hours. Consent from students and permission from university administration were taken.

### 3. Results

Means and standard deviations of the ASPH-S, ASPH-P (Positive), and ASPH-N (Negative) scores by independent variables are displayed in Table 2. Separate one-way multivariate analyses of variances (MANOVA) were conducted on the total scores and subscale scores of ASPH-S. The aim was to examine whether scores of participants on each subscale differed in terms of gender, living arrangement, age, place grown up, mother education and father education. Bonferroni approach was used to control for Type I error across the pair wise comparisons. Each comparison was tested at .005 alpha level.

*Gender.*

MANOVA indicated significant differences in terms of gender [Wilk's Lambda = .89,  $F(2, 346) = 20.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ ]. Significant differences between men and women were found on both ASPH-S total [ $F(1, 349) = 30.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ]; and ASPH-S-Positive [ $F(1, 1261) = 40.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Women scored higher than men on both ASPH-S-Total and ASPH-S-Positive.

*Age.*

The results of the MANOVA yielded significant effect of age [Wilk's Lambda = .81,  $F(2, 346) = 19.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ ]. As follow-up tests to MANOVA, separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted on each dependent variable. The ANOVAs on ASPH-S Total [ $F(1, 347) = 6.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ]; and ASPH-S-Negative [ $F(1, 347) = 38.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ ] were significant. Post-hoc analyses indicated that students between ages 24 and 28 scored significantly higher on help-seeking attitudes than students aged between 17 and 19. In addition, students in the first and second age range scored significantly higher on negative help-seeking than students in the third age range.

*Place grown up.*

No significant effect of place grown up was found on scores of ASPH-S, Wilk's Lambda = .99,  $F(2, 340) = .57$ ,  $p = .50$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ .

*Living arrangement.*

MANOVA showed significant effect of living arrangement [Wilk's Lambda = .92,  $F(2, 344) = 3.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ]. The ANOVAs on ASPH-S-Positive [ $F(4, 349) = 3.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ ], and ASPH-S-Negative [ $F(4, 349) = 3.81$ ,  $p < .005$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ ] were significant. Post-hoc analyses indicated that students living with relatives scored significantly higher on ASPH-S-Positive than students living in dormitories and students living alone. In addition, students who lived in the dormitories scored significantly higher on ASPH-S-Negative than students who lived with their families, who lived with their friends, and who lived with their relatives.

*Mother and father education.*

MANOVA resulted in significant effect of mother education [Wilk's Lambda = .96,  $F(2, 344) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ], and father education [Wilk's Lambda = .95,  $F(2, 344) = 2.85$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ]. For the mother education, the ANOVA on ASPH-S-Negative [ $F(3, 346) = 2.76$ ,  $p < .005$ ;  $\eta^2 = .03$ ] was significant. Post-hoc analyses indicated that students whose mothers had higher education degree scored significantly lower on ASPH-S-Negative than students who had mothers with elementary education. In terms of father education, the ANOVA on ASPH-S-Negative [ $F(3, 348) = 5.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .05$ ] was significant. Post-hoc analyses indicated that students whose fathers had university or above education degree scored significantly lower on ASPH-S-Negative than students who had fathers with elementary education.

*Previous help-seeking experience.*

The results of the MANOVA indicated no significant effect of previous help-seeking experience on the total or subscale scores of ASPH-S, Wilk's Lambda = .99,  $F(2, 345) = .23$ ,  $p = .80$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ .

*Presence of a problem.*

MANOVA indicated significant effect of presence of a current problem that needs professional help [Wilk's Lambda = .91,  $F(2, 346) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ]. The ANOVA on ASPH-S was significant [ $F(1, 346) = 2.52$ ,  $p < .005$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ ]. Students who reported having a current problem scored significantly higher on ASPH-S than students who reported no problems.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the ASPH-S, ASPH-P and ASPH-N scores by independent variables.

	ASPH-S-Total		ASPH-S-Positive		ASPH-S-Negative	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Gender						
Female	71.86	11.03	49.88	8.32	21.98	6.79
Male	65.14	9.86	43.54	9.62	21.59	6.41
Age						
17-19	69.82	9.73	45.88	8.32	23.94	4.32

20-23	66.82	9.77	47.77	10.37	23.87	5.35
24-28	71.64	12.33	48.99	8.18	17.84	7.67
Place Grown Up						
Metropolitan	69.02	11.21	47.60	8.85	21.42	6.93
City	70.28	11.25	48.16	9.72	22.12	6.03
Town/village	71.05	10.78	47.68	10.41	23.38	6.72
Living Arrangement						
Campus dormitory	70.41	12.60	46.34	11.02	24.07	4.95
Alone	66.50	13.02	45.75	9.15	20.75	6.99
With friends	68.64	10.48	47.91	8.59	20.53	7.57
With family	69.54	10.35	48.08	8.49	21.47	6.65
With relatives	73.10	8.64	53.53	5.87	19.57	8.26
Father Education						
Elementary	68.52	13.85	49.54	9.97	23.10	5.74
Secondary	68.72	11.00	48.03	9.26	22.24	6.51
High	69.89	8.92	49.64	7.77	20.69	7.03
University and above	70.68	11.39	48.92	9.14	18.98	7.97
Mother Education						
Elementary	69.62	11.44	47.24	8.61	22.68	6.49
Secondary	69.30	11.68	48.34	8.67	22.68	6.25
High	70.05	9.41	49.36	8.20	20.95	6.31
University and above	70.02	10.04	49.81	9.11	20.38	7.22
Presence of a current problem						
Yes	72.26	12.78	47.86	9.09	22.38	6.01
No	69.12	10.12	47.77	9.31	21.45	7.09
Previous help-seeking						
Yes	69.89	12.25	48.22	9.64	21.67	6.97
No	70.57	10.38	46.62	8.94	22.95	6.52

#### 4. Conclusion

This study found significant effects of demographic variables on help-seeking attitudes of university students. As consistent with the studies from different cultures (Gloria, Hild, & Navarro, 2001; Boldero & Fallon, 1995), girls had more positive attitudes towards seeking psychological help than boys. Turkish female university students may be more comfortable with seeking out others in coping with problems while males are expected to be autonomous. Age also had effect on the help-seeking attitudes in that, as the age increased the positive attitudes toward psychological help seeking also increased, which supported the argument that younger people tend to have less negative attitudes toward formal help-seeking. The role of education level of parents in young people's help-seeking attitudes was also supported in this study. Increased level of education was associated with more positive attitudes.

Having a good social network may encourage people to ask for help from outside sources (Gourash, 1978). Likely, perceived social support may be important in assisting one's coping with problems by building this network. Lack of such social support may predispose people in having maladaptive coping. The finding that students living with their families, relatives and friends had less negative attitudes toward psychological help seeking than students living on campus may be related to this relationship between social support and help-seeking. That is, students who have access to a network of family, relatives and friends may be encouraged by these people to use active coping such as help-seeking while students on campus have less opportunities for having this social network.

The descriptive statistics showed that although the number of students who reported a current problem exceeded the students without a problem, a very small percent indicated that they received professional help before. This provides a little support for the unwillingness of students to seek psychological help. In general, seeking help from formal sources has high costs for the individual in that it may be seemed as threatening (Wills, 1992). In addition, young people may be turning to their peers for help since they think peers may be more helpful than formal sources.

The subgroup characteristics should be considered while designing and delivering counseling and support services for university students. Males may need special attention as well as students living on campus. They may benefit from special programs which will encourage them to seek help from formal sources.

The findings of this study are limited in that it reflects the reports of university students of similar characteristics. The analyses were also correlation in nature and thus, further research is needed to highlight the predictors of help-seeking attitudes and the causal relationships between the variables.

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