Psychological help seeking attitudes among Malaysian College and university students

Suradi Salim*a

“Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Received January 3, 2010; revised February 9, 2010; accepted March 4, 2010

Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the help-seeking attitudes of Malaysian students in order to understand their readiness to seek psychological services. A total of 2508 students from seven public tertiary education institutions participated in this study. The findings reveal that students generally do not seek helps from counselors. The mean score is 49.6 which is in the low score category. Generally 49.1% of the students are in the low scorers category, 41% in the medium scorers category and only 9.3 are in the high scores category. The mean scores in all the four factors in the scale are also low.

Keywords: Psychological service, counseling, help-seeking attitudes.

1. Introduction

Counseling have formally been introduced in Malaysia, in the beginning, in Malaysian schools, in the sixties. With over 50 years of history, the profession of counseling in Malaysia has been growing rapidly in recent years and the number of counselors and counseling centers have been increasing. To enhance the accountability of the counseling services, Counselors Act was passed by the Government in 1998 and national registration for professional counselors was introduced in 1999. However, in spite of increased counseling services, in schools, colleges and universities, and also in the public as well as the government sectors, many students with personal, psychological and mental health issues still do not consider seeking professional psychological help as a way of resolving their problems (Salim & Mohd Jaladin, 2005). Because attitudes have been found to be strongly related to actual help-seeking (Cramer, 1999), a better understanding of Malaysian students’ help seeking attitudes may impact the way counseling services are designed and delivered in Malaysian colleges and universities and may improve access and delivery of such services to those needing counseling services. As such, the purpose of this study was to determine the readiness of Malaysian students in higher institutions readiness to seek psychological service by examining the help-seeking attitudes of Malaysian students and the influence of gender, ethnic background, psychological variables, and cultural variables toward seeking professional psychological help in the universities and colleges in Malaysia.
It is a sad and undeniable fact that students in Malaysian universities and colleges greatly underutilize counseling services despite high needs. Many students in Malaysian institutions of higher learning who experience academics, personal, vocational, social or psychological problems do not seek help from professional counselors. Several reasons are cited as to why students with problems do not seek professional help in the literature. These reasons include limited knowledge or available services, lack of awareness regarding the severity of problems, cultural and or gender factors and stigma associated with psychological problems (Salim & Mohd Jaladin, 2005). One line of reasoning suggests that many students hold negative views about psychological helps and their tremendous stigma and shame about psychological help. However, despite much anecdotal evidence only a few studies have empirically scrutinized these notions.

The earliest studies related to help seeking attitudes among Malaysian public, specifically college and university students, was done by Reiko (2008). Reiko examines the Malaysian public’s knowledge and attitude towards psychology and mental health. Her findings indicated that majority of the respondents (90%) did not have good knowledge of psychology and mental health issues. However, all respondents in her study displayed a more or less neutral attitude towards psychology (the profession) as well as mental health issues. Her findings also seem to suggest that respondents’ knowledge level is not related to their attitude level. Regression analysis indicated that age, ethnic background, religion, education level, and residential location are the few demographic characteristics found to be significantly related to either respondent’s knowledge, attitude towards mental health issues and help seeking behavior. In the second part of her study her findings indicated that undergraduate students harbour misconceptions about psychology regardless of their declared major (psychology and non-psychology major) and demographic characteristics. Interestingly, she found that students’ knowledge level in both psychology and mental health were significantly better than the general public.

Chian and Louis (2009) who investigated the impact of Asian and European American cultural values and perceived social support on the attitudes and behaviors of Malaysian college students toward seeking psychological help found that there is a negative correlation between Asian cultural values and help-seeking attitudes. Their study involved 235 Malaysian students from six tertiary education institutions. The participants consisted of 159 females and 76 males from three major ethnic groups (Malay, 50; Chinese, 118; and Indian, 67), between ages of 18-25 years old. After performing the multiple regression analysis between the predictor variables of Asian cultural values, European American values, and perceived social support with outcome variables of helping-seeking attitudes and behaviors, they found that there is a negative correlation between Asian cultural values and help-seeking attitudes. European America values and perceived social support were found to be positively correlated with help-seeking attitudes while attitudes toward seeking help significantly influenced help-seeking behaviors.

Those who seek help primarily do so as a result of a crisis stemming from major financial difficulties, family breakdown, job loss and or criminal charges (Mey, Othman, Salim & Che Din, 2009). Differences in reasons for people to seek help or not pose two questions; firstly, whether people simply lack resources to access counseling services and secondly, whether they have negative attitudes toward seeking psychological services? The aim of the current study was to find answers for these questions.

Generally, counseling services in Malaysia are provided, either in schools, higher institutions and public sectors, not because empirical studies have been conducted to identify the needs but mostly because it is a services provided in institutions in developed countries thus it is believed that Malaysian also need the services. The concept of seeking formal help is relatively a Western beliefs, borne out of values such as autonomy, individualism, mastery of the environment, and future orientation commonly found in individualistic cultures (Chian & Lois, 2009).

2. Method

Participants. A total of 2508 Malaysian students from seven public tertiary education institutions participated in this study. The participants consisted of 1,636 females and 872 males from all faculties and from all year of studies (First year, 524 (20.9%), Second year, 852 (34%), Third year, 797 (32.8%), Fourth year, 301 (1.4%) and Fifth year, 34 (1.4%). In terms of ethnic groups, majority of the participants are Malay, 1751 (60.8%), Chinese, 320 (12.8%), Indian, 148 (5.9%), and the rest 289 (11.5%) are the Indigenous ethnics population of East Malaysia, (Sabah and Sarawak). Participants were recruited through convenient sampling.
3. Measures

Participants’ attitudes toward help-seeking were assessed using The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Scale – ATSPPHS (Fischer & Turner, 1970). The scale consists of 29 Likert items such as, “Although there are clinics for people with mental troubles, I would not have much faith in them (item 1)”, and “Emotional difficulties, like many things, tend to work out by themselves (item 9).” Participants rated the item on a 4-point scale (0 = disagreement, 1 = Probable Disagreement, 2 = Probable Agreement and 3 = Agreement). After the reverse scoring of 18 items (1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, & 29), a summation of the scores for all the 29 items nets the total score, a composite measure of participants’ help-seeking attitude. A high total score represents a positive attitude toward seeking professional help in mental health services. For easy interpretation Fischer and Turner (1970) classified participants into three groups or categories based on the total scores obtained. Low scorers (29-49) in this scale are expressing negative attitude toward seeking professional help for themselves or for their friends, medium scorers (50-63) are acknowledging that professional help can be useful but that they are somewhat unsure about their willingness to use it, and high scorers (64-87) are expressing a very positive attitude toward seeking and using professional help (Fischer and Turner, 1970). In this study, minor changes were made in the scale pertaining to the word “Psychiatrists” and “psychiatric” by substituting the words “counselors” and “psychological” respectively due to the fact that this research is focused on psychological help, not psychiatric help. The questionnaire was available in both English and Malay. The Malay language version questionnaire was back translated to ensure the reliability and validity of quality translation. The internal reliability computed for standardization sample of n=212 was .86 and on a larger sample size of 406, the internal reliability was .83 (Fischer & Turner, 1970). The scale underwent test-retest reliabilities five times and showed good and moderately strong consistencies throughout, with r=.86 (n=26), r=.89 (n=47), r=.82 (n=31), r=.73 (n=19), and r=.84 (n=20) (Fischer & Turner, 1970). This scale has also demonstrated strong validity when known-group validity tests were run (Fischer and Turner, 1970). Overall, this scale has been used in other research studies (Duncan, 2003; Chian & Louis, 2009). Test-retest reliability test was conducted with a Malaysian sample and the result is a strong correlation of r=.741 (Chian & Louis, 2009).

4. Results

A total of 2508 participants’ response were collected, tabulated and analyzed with t test and one way analysis of variance using the SPSS 14.0 statistical package. As shown in Table 1, 49.1% of the participants are in the Low Scorers category expressing a negative attitudes toward seeking professional help for themselves or for their friends. This does not mean that these student are having problems or have any need for for professional help. It only indicates that if they were to be feeling high levels of stress, or depression, or anxiety they would not be inclined to turn to a counselor or mental health professional for assistance. About 41% of the participants are in the Medium Scores category acknowledging that professional help can be useful but they are somewhat unsure about their willingness to use it. Only 9.3 % of the participants are in the High Scorers category expressing positive attitude toward seeking and using professional help. The overall mean score is 49.6, the mean score for male participants is 48.84 and mean score for the female participants is 50.1. There is a significant difference in the attitudes of male and female patricipants (t=−2.909, p<.05) but there is no significant difference between ethnic Malay, Chinese, and Indian (F=2.167 p>.05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Scorers (29-49)</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Scorers (50-63)</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Scorers (64-87)</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the participants scores in the ATPHS subscales. For Factor I; Recognition of Need for Psychological Help the mean is 12.9 and Standard Deviation 3.6. For Factor II; Stigma tolerance the mean is 9.6
and Standard Deviation is 2.9, for Factor III: Interpersonal openness, the mean is 9.3 while the Standard Deviation is 3.6, and For Factor IV: Confidence in helpers, the mean is 17.8 and the Standard Deviation is 4.0.

Table 2. Participants’s Scores in the Subscales of the Attitude toward Psychological Help Scale (ATPHS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Maximum Scores</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor I: Recognition of need for psychological help</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor II: Stigma tolerance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor III: Interpersonal openness</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor IV: Confidence in helpers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 37.8% of the students who participated in the study said that they have seen a counselor for help, while 62.2% said that they have not seen a counselor for counseling service. The percentage of students who have sought the help of psychologists is only 0.6% while 99.4% have never consulted any Psychologist. Only 8 students (0.3%) mentioned having seen a psychiatrist. Majority of the students (80.7%) who participated in this study would rather seek the help of friends when they have problems, whether personal or psychological, 12.4% preferred the help of their parents, 5.2% would approach their lectures, and only 43 (9.3%) out of the 2508 students who participated in this study said that they would seek the help of counselors if they have problems.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study have contributed to understanding Malaysian students attitudes toward seeking psychological or mental health services. The findings shows that generally Malaysian students in higher institutions are not yet ready to seek psychological services. The findings of this study are line with Reiko (2008) and Chian and Louis (2009) studies. Although most of the students in colleges and universitis in Malaysia have been exposed to guidance and counseling services in the secondary schools their general apprehension about seeking psychological help persisted. Many students may not see the potential benefits of the services provided by counselors or psychologist. This information is vital to counselors, counselor educator, university administrators, and university personnel serving university students. Simply offering students counseling services may not in itself increase students’ utilization of counseling services.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it appears that Malaysian students may need to be educated about the role of mental health professionals and benefit of receiving professional psychological help. Furthermore, the existing stigma surrounding psychological help seeking needs to be reduced. Perhaps changing the name of the counseling services center from The Counseling Centers to Center for Campus Life and Culture may reduce the effects of labeling and the stigma that Malaysian students have toward counseling, thus making counseling services more inviting and accessible. To further reduce the negative effects of labeling and stigma on seeking counseling services, procedures need to be developed to introduce counseling as a viable source of help. Students should be expose to the university counseling services early on in their university career, so that they can learn about the importance of mental health services for their college success. More outreach programs and psychological education talks, seminars and workshops need to be conducted targeted to all students irrespective of their level of seniority. Counselors need to tackle this issues wisely by not waiting for their prospective client to knock their doors but start promoting their services and explaining the true nature of counseling and psychological help to students as well as to the society.
References


