HELP SEEKING BEHAVIOR AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

From the past until current era, counseling or mental health service has not been recognized as the priority choice of help seeking methods to adolescents when they encountered problems. Primary objective of this study is to diagnose the help seeking behavior of adolescents in Malaysia. Researchers would like to explore whether the demographic variables (age, gender, race and religion) have any effect on adolescents' help seeking behavior. 170 secondary school students have completed the Attitude toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) questionnaires. Findings indicated that age, gender and race able to influence individuals' help seeking behavior. Research can also be conducted in rural area in future with all the current study's demographic variables remained, so this able to help researcher to gain better insights on the help seeking behaviors of rural secondary schools' students.

Keywords: Help Seeking Behavior, Counseling, Secondary School Students, Malaysia, Demographical Variables

1. Introduction

Emergence of social problems which massively involved teenagers have made the role of school counseling became critical gradually. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has proposed and offered several helpful counseling programs for the students. This is to ascertain that students have a good and interruption-free process of transition from childhood to adolescence (Slaughter, 2008). Students who have immediate mental health problems should seek professional consultation and assistance early from registered counselor (Takamura, Oshima, Yoshida & Motonaga, 2008).

Since 2000s, the Malaysian government has assigned at least one full time counselor in each secondary school which also been referred as guidance and counseling officer (See, 2004). Counseling is one of the mechanisms that assist students in dealing their daily problems. Students are encouraged to well-leveraged the counseling service in school. This is to ensure students are well-developed especially in psychological aspect. Nevertheless, counseling or mental health service has never be recognized as priority choice for students to seek help from when they are encountering stresses and problems.

Help sources can be further decomposed into two categories, namely natural and formal. Natural source of help is refers to family, friends, roommates, partners and co-workers, whereas formal
source of help has included clergy, teachers, school counselors and professional counselors (Meyer, 2009). In Takamura et al. (2008) study, majority of adolescents has been found they would rather rely on natural source of help than formal source. Students are preferably to seek helps from friends and family members and less willing to share their problems with clergy, teachers, school counselors and professional counselors (Meyer, 2009).

Corrigan (2005) has mentioned that stigma is one of the major reasons of why students refused to seek appropriate treatment from professional counselor. Stigma can be categorized into two types, namely public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigma means individual does not seek for psychological assistance is to avoid labeling, prejudice and discrimination from public, whereas self-stigma can be defined as the internal form of stigma which “to avoid the internalization of negative societal attitudes about people with mental disorders and subsequent diminished self-esteem” (Vogel & Wade, 2009; Wong, 2007).

The Malaysian Ministry of Health has identified that adolescents with age range from 15 to 25 is one of the highest risk groups to commit suicide (Hayati & Kamarul, 2008). They are the group which has been pressured by tremendous changes in lives regardless of physical and psychological changes. Thus, the stress management skill is very crucial to help them in handling the chaos and have a balance in their lives. High suicidal rate among teenagers could also be explained through students’ resistance in seeking help from professional parties (Hayati & Kamarul, 2008). Researchers have also discovered that open mindedness towards seeking psychological help will reduce the level of suicidal ideations among adolescents (Husky, McGuire, Flynn, Chrostowski & Olfson, 2009). By developing access in educational settings able to improve students’ mental health status of adolescent age group before they encountered tedious mental problem (Takamura et al., 2008).

In this study, the primary objective is to examine the help seeking behavior of secondary school students in Malaysia. Researchers would like to understand whether the help seeking behavior differs in the demographic aspects of age group, gender and race. Via this research, it could help the readers, parents and the Ministry of Education of Malaysia to have comprehensive insight on how the interaction of these demographic variables may affect the Malaysia adolescents in their help seeking behavior and it also assist the researchers to further explore which key factor may directly influence students’ help seeking behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Help Seeking Behavior

Help seeking behavior, an action opted by an individual for the purpose of release psychological distress and it will involve helping professionals such as licensed counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist (Calloway, 2008). Help seeking can also be divided into two types namely informal or natural and formal. Informal help-seeking refers to seeking help from non-helping professionals such as friends and family members. Services provided by licensed helping professionals such as counselor, psychologist and psychiatrist will be known as formal help-seeking (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi, 2005). In order to functionalize the definitions, help seeking is frequently measured by Attitude toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS).
2.2 Gender and Help Seeking Behavior

According to Ledet (2009), gender able to contribute impact to affect an individual’s help seeking behavior. Numerous studies had evidenced the difference in genders over their help seeking behaviors (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Mackenzie, Gekoski & Knox, 2006; Rickwood et al, 2005). Female has been identified to have positive attitude towards seeking psychological mental health, while male has lesser favoritism to seek professional psychological help due to social pressure. Male has generally been perceived to possess stable emotion and able to well-cope stress independently (Berk, 2009). Furthermore, the conventional roles of male prescribed that seeking help from professional counselors delivers a strong sense of failure and indirectly admits their incapability to handle things well (Vogel & Wade, 2009). Hence, they rather to suffer mental health problem than seeking help from helping professionals.

Lee (2002) stated that man who seeks assistance from helping professionals will be perceived by society as inferior, weak and incompetent person. Male students are more reluctant in help seeking if compared to female students due to embarrassment and denial. Research which conducted by Addis and Mahalik (2003), findings revealed that male students usually less preferred to seek mental help regardless of their races, ages and social backgrounds. This result has been ascertained in Pogach (2008) study which less than 50 percent of male had found to be less likely to seek mental health service as compared to female.

2.3 Age Group and Help Seeking Behavior

Myriad studies had evidenced the differences between age groups and help seeking behavior (Jeweler-Bentz, 2002; Mackenzie et al., 2006; Mackenzie, Knox, Gekoski, & Macaulay, 2004). According to Mackenzie, Gekoski and Knox (2006), age able to influence the adolescents’ attitude in seeking professional psychology help. Result was in line with Jeweler-Bentz’s (2002) finding. Jeweler-Bentz (2002) identified that younger age (below 25 years old) individuals are more likely to look for other helping sources such as peer, rather than seeking professional mental health services. However, this result has been found to be contrasted with Fallon and Bowles (2001) and Sanger (1999) studies, whereby age is insignificant as related to help seeking behavior. Fallon and Bowles (2001) mentioned that parents and teachers portray vital role in shaping children’s positive attitude towards help seeking. Nevertheless, this study was focused on younger children instead of adolescents. Therefore, the discrepancies might resulted by the target population.

2.4 Race and Help Seeking Behavior

Race is another factor that affects people's help seeking behavior (Ojeda & Bergstresser, 2008; Shim, Compton, Rust, Druss & Kaslow, 2009). Counselor’s cultural background has also delivered impact towards adolescents’ help seeking behaviors. According to the National Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, people are less likely to seek psychological help from those who are different races and cultures from them. Help seekers prefer to seek help from professionals who are registered counselors that possess similar cultural background with them. Help seeker might have the perception that he or she able to provide better insight to assist them in solving problem.

Among the three main races in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese and Indian), there were limited researches have been done on Malay and Indian, most of the studies were focused on Chinese. Xie (2007) revealed that Chinese tends to possess positive attitude towards seeking professional psychological
help under certain conditions. According to Xie (2007), when Chinese student believes that helping professional has greater knowledge in handling emotional or psychological issues than non-professionals, they tend to have higher willingness to seek their helps. Besides, Chinese will only seek psychological help when their problem has beyond their control (Goh, Wahl, Zhong, Lian & Romano, 2007).

Nevertheless, different studies delivered different findings. According to Fan (2000), Chinese is not willing to seek psychological help from professionals due to the conservative Chinese culture had shaped the negative attitude and perception towards help seeking (Xia & Jiang, 2007). In the past research of Sue and Morishima (1982), psychological disorder has been viewed as personality deficit by Chinese citizens. Thus, in order to maintain their good reputation, they will say no to help seeking.

3. Research Methodology

Research study has been conducted in eight secondary schools which located in Penang and Ipoh areas. The target population was 12,000 students. A total sample of 169 secondary school students has been selected based on stratified sampling method. According to Roscue (1975), the sample size should be at least ten times as large as the number of variables. The sample per variable ratio is 1:42 in this study. Therefore, the sample size is adequate and large enough. Various biographical data such as gender, age and race had obtained. Table 1 gives an indication of the frequency distribution and percentages according to gender, age and race.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of the sample groups according to race, gender and age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biographical Variables</th>
<th>Number of Samples (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender :</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race :</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age :</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 16</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 – 18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With 169 respondents, majority were female respondents (n=122, 72%) while male respondents comprised only 28% of the total sample size (n=47). Main bulk of the samples was collected from Chinese, 89% (n=150), the remaining samples were from Malay (n=12, 7%) and Indian (n=7, 4%). Sixty percent (n=101) of respondents were from the age group of 15-16, followed by 17-18 years old (n=35, 21%) and 13-14 years old (n=33, 19%).
3.2 Procedures and Instruments

Personally administered questionnaire method has been leveraged in this research study. The questionnaire comprised of two sections. The first section consists of three questions which pertaining to the biographical data of respondents. Second section was the measurement questions for help seeking behavior of secondary school students in Malaysia which referred and revised from Attitude toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS), developed by Fischer and Turner (1970). It was the only measurement with most psychometric supported among the existing measures of help seeking attitudes (Mackenzie et al., 2004). The measurement comprised of 29 items. Each item was measured by 4-point rating scale (Mackenzie et al., 2004) namely agree (A), somewhat agree (SA), somewhat disagree (SD) and disagree (D). The score of ATSPPHS ranged from 0 to 87. The higher the score means the higher the willingness to seek for psychological help (Jeweler-Bentzx, 2002).

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, Principals of all target secondary schools had been contacted in order to obtain their authorization to conduct research survey within their school compounds. Survey was further aided by school counselors who had been trained professionally and the school counselors had been communicated with necessary information to ensure high clarity message had been conveyed to clear their ambiguities. All respondents who participated in this survey were given a short briefing on the importance of the survey. Participants were also requested to answer the questionnaire personally with their own view without influence.

Pilot test has been implemented in order to ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire. The ATSPPHS has an internal consistency of result that ranged from 0.83 to 0.86 and the test-retest reliability was 0.89 for the full scale (Fisher & Turner, 1970). All survey data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially by using SPSS 20. Various analysis techniques have been adopted to test the hypotheses such as independent sample t-test and One-way ANOVA. Independent sample t-test was used to test the differences between male and female towards help seeking behavior from professional helper. For One-way ANOVA, it has been used to test the differences among the age groups and races toward help seeking behavior from professional helper.

4. Results

Hypothesis One:

There is significant difference between male and female secondary school students in help seeking behavior.

According to Table 2, the p-value (0.269) for Equality of Variances is higher than the alpha value of 0.05; it shows that the variances are equal. In other words, the variance of the mean of help seeking behavior for male and female is equal. Therefore, the t-value under equal variances (-2.811) should be reported. The p-value under equal variance is 0.006 which much smaller than alpha value 0.05. Hence, alternate hypothesis is supported. The result shows that there is significant difference between gender and help seeking behavior. The mean score for male respondent is 29.89 while the mean score for the female respondent is 34.26; it is also means that male is less willing to seek for psychological help as compared to female.
Table 2: Independent Sample t-Test for Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equal Variances</th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>assumed</td>
<td>F 1.231 Sig. .269 t -2.811 df 167 Sig. (2-tailed) .006 Mean Difference -4.36868 Std. Error Difference 1.55427 Lower -7.43724 Upper -1.30012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not assumed</td>
<td>F -2.564 Sig. 70.617 t .012 Mean Difference -4.36868 Std. Error Difference 1.70381 Lower -7.6631 Upper -9.7105</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Age Group with Help Seeking Behavior

Hypothesis Two:
There is significant difference among age groups in secondary students’ help seeking behavior.

Table 3 indicated the Levene’s test of equality of variances gives a p-value of 0.988, which is more than 0.05. The variances for each group can be assumed to be similar. The p-value for ANOVA test is 0.375 which more than the alpha value of 0.05. Therefore, the second hypothesis for this study is not supported. In other words, there is no difference among age groups. The mean difference for between aged groups 13-14 and 15-16, 13-14 and 17-18 and 15-16 and 17-18 are 0.02354, 0.05565 and 0.03862 respectively.

Table 3: ANOVA test for Age Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test of Homogeneity of Variances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levene Statistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 1.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df1 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df2 166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. Value 0.306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANOVA

F Value = 0.012; Sig. Value = 0.988

Turkey HSD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (I)</th>
<th>Age Group (J)</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Sig. Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>17-18</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>17-18</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.981</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Race with Help Seeking Behavior

Hypothesis Three:
There is significant difference among races in students’ help seeking behavior of Malaysian secondary school students.

Table 4, the Levene’s test of equality of variances gives a p-value of 0.742 which is more than 0.05. The variances for each group are approximately equal. The mean scores for Chinese, Malay and Indian respondents are 3.43, 1.41 and 1.46 respectively. The One-Way ANOVA p-value is 0.026 which lesser than the alpha value of 0.05. Thus, the third proposed alternate hypothesis is supported.
This is also means that at least one pair of the races differ significantly towards help seeking behavior. Based on the Turkey t-Tests in Table 3, there are two pairs of races Chinese with Malay and Chinese with Indian are significantly different in help seeking behavior.

Table 4: ANOVA test for Races

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test of Homogeneity of Variances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levene Statistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.299</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANOVA

F Value – 3.714; Sig. Value - 0.026

Turkey HSD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (I)</th>
<th>Age Group (J)</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Sig. Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>-2.02</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.952</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

5.1 Gender and Help Seeking Behavior

Many researchers revealed gender played a pivotal role in determining one’s help seeking behavior. This study had shown a consistent result with several past studies. According to Hawkins, Spigner and Murphy (1990), gender is one of the factors to predict the positive help seeking behavior. In between male and female, female is majority who has been found to have positive attitude and higher willingness to seek for psychological help (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Buckley & Malouff, 2005; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006).

Numerous reasons rationalized that male is less likely to seek professional psychological help. Few past studies mentioned that male does not want to admit to others about the presence of their problems and they prefer to rely on themselves in solving problems (Kam, 1999; Offer, Howard, Schonert & Ostrov, 1991). Expression of emotion may be viewed as inappropriate and weak for male (Liou, 2004). Besides, lack of experience in seeking emotional helps and parents’ disapproval also led to male unwilling to seek for mental health services. Fear of stigma (Wang, Lane, Olfson, Pincus, Wells & Kessler, 2005) which included the confidentiality of professional psychological help, fear of being known by peers and recognition of need. The confidence level towards the helping professionals and interpersonal openness (Fischer & Turner, 1970) are also other reasons that caused male are more reluctant to seek help from professionals.

5.2 Age Group and Help Seeking Behavior

This study has concluded that there is no significant difference among age groups in help seeking behavior. Three age groups which ranged from 13 to 18 years old have equivalent negative attitude or lower willingness toward mental health services, mainly due to adolescents worried about the cost, lack of knowledge about mental health system and confusion of the availability of mental health services (Robb, Haley, Becker, Polivka, & Chwa, 2003). Current study’s result has found to be consistent with past studies’ findings (Fung & Wong, 2007; Segal, Mincic, Coolidge & O’Riley, 2005).
5.3 Races and Help Seeking Behavior

Research result had shown significant difference among races towards help seeking behavior. Among races, Chinese had displayed the highest willingness to seek help from professionals as compared to Indian and Malay. Chinese students have positive attitudes toward counseling and they believe those helping professionals have greater knowledge regarding emotional or psychological issues than non-professionals (Xie, 2007). They also believe that they will only seek psychological helps when their problems encountered are beyond their controls (Goh et al., 2007).

In contrary to Malay, Malay has negative attitude towards mental health services. According to Swami, Furnham, Kannan and Sinniah (2008), Malay viewed psychological disorder as a sin. Therefore, to avoid from social pressure, those who are having psychological disorder most likely will not seek help from professionals. Belief on causation of disorder influence determines one’s in help seeking behavior (Banerjee & Roy, 1998). Whereas Indian, they believed that psychological problem mainly caused by supernatural power (Hirai, 1999) and they are more prefer to seek help from Shaman rather than helping professionals.

6. Practical Implications

This research aims to identify the relationships of gender, age and races toward professional psychological help seeking behavior among adolescents in Malaysia. The ultimate research findings revealed consistent results with Rickwood et al. (2005) study; results also indicated that female is more willing to seek help from professionals as compared to male adolescent. When man seeking for psychological help, it signified that they are incompetent, inferior and weak (Lee, 2002). Counselors should pay more attention on this issue while dealing with male clients and provide a secure ambience for them to release their distress. It is also essential to educate students about the counseling service is not only for problematic group instead it is also for those who are in need.

Based on present findings, Malay is least likely to seek help from professionals as their culture indicated that psychological disorder was sinful (Swami et al., 2008). Helping professionals have to be receptive to new knowledge and to be sensitive to the culture diversities in order to ensure help seeker feels comfortable and secure while dealing with them. There will be higher satisfaction for help seeker if the counselor is come from the similar background.

7. Limitations

There are several limitations to be acknowledged. First, this study utilized only 170 respondents from two states in Malaysia, thus the results are less generalize to other states which are not included in the study. It is possible to include respondents from major states such as Selangor, Johor and Penang in future studies, perhaps there will be differentials toward ultimate findings. Secondly, the number of Chinese respondent is more than other races. The unequal distribution in each race would influence the accuracy of the results.

8. Conclusion and Future Research

Through this study, we can see the trend of help seeking is still weak in Malaysia. The Malaysian Government should work hard and promote the importance of help seeking behavior to all students...
by conducting various workshop and awareness talk. For future research, researchers are recommended to adopt proportionate stratified sampling technique to divide the population into sub population or strata and determine the number of participants or respondents in each stratum based on the size of population for each race. It is also encouraged to examine the secondary school students’ help seeking behavior in rural and urban areas. This will definitely help researcher to have deeper understanding on the differences in help seeking behavior of rural and urban secondary school students.

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