

A Study of the Relationship Among Variables in Seeking Professional Help

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship among factors connected with seeking professional help in Japanese university students. Two hundred and thirty-eight students completed a questionnaire about their attitude toward seeking professional help, intention to seek professional help, concerns regarding counseling, expectations from counseling, help-seeking preference, and previous counseling experience. An analysis of variance indicated that (a) students who had previous counseling experience had a more positive attitude and willingness to seek professional help and (b) there was no significant gender difference. Further, a factor analysis showed that although most variables were classified into two factors, the intention to seek professional help was not included among them.

Introduction

When individuals have problems, seeking help from others is one of the important coping strategies. In assistance for psychological problems, receiving professional help such as counseling and psychotherapy has a significant effect (Smith & Glass, 1977; Wampold, 2001). Therefore, receiving professional help is effective when individuals experience serious problems that cannot be solved by themselves or with the help of people close to them. However, it has been reported in many countries the rate of individuals with serious psychological problems actually seeking professional help was not high (e.g., Andrews, Issakidis, & Carter, 2001).

Similarly, in Japan, there are many university students who eventually

commit suicide without receiving diagnosis and treatment by professionals, and it has been shown that only about 20% of the students who committed suicide sought help from in the university health management centers (Uchida, 2011). In order to reduce such problems, it is essential to construct a system that allows people with problems to receive appropriate help in addition to preventing problems. It is necessary to clarify the psychological process of seeking professional help.

Seeking help from other people, such as professionals, is defined as help-seeking behavior in psychology (DePaulo, 1983). There are many studies about help-seeking. Previous studies have shown that based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) as theoretical background, the attitudes toward help-seeking and help-seeking intentions are important determinants of help-seeking behavior. As for the measurement of the attitude, “Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (ATSPHS; Fischer & Turner, 1970)” is the most widely used scale. Furthermore, a short version of this scale with a single factor structure has also been developed (Fisher & Farina, 1995), and in recent years this short version has been commonly used.

Although there is a large number of studies, there are only a few studies about help-seeking from professionals in Japan. Of course, although some studies on this subject have been reported, sufficient considerations have not been made on basic matters, such as the relationship between the attitude towards help-seeking and help-seeking intentions. Furthermore, the knowledge has not been integrated sufficiently because of some methodological problems such as the use of different scales by each study. For these reasons, in Japanese research about help-seeking from professionals, it is necessary to clarify how basic variables of help-seeking are related to each other.

1. Factors related to attitude toward help-seeking and help-seeking intentions

In this study, we focused on the attitude towards help-seeking and help-seeking intentions to clarify their relationship with factors of help-seeking. We focused on expectations and concerns about seeking counseling as variables to study the relationship. Furthermore, relationships with help-seeking preferences, previous counseling experience, and gender were also examined. While these factors do not directly represent help-seeking, they are important variables and are often considered in help-seeking studies.

Expectations and concerns about seeking counseling

In recent studies, positive outcome anticipation/expectation and negative outcome anticipation/anxiety have been used as predictors of help-seeking. In other countries, a series of studies by D.L.Vogel is an example (Shaffer, Vogel, & Wei, 2006; Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2008; Vogel & Wester, 2003; Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005), and in Japan, studies of junior high school students using anticipated cost and benefit for help-seeking from friends among junior-high school students are examples (Nagai & Arai, 2007, 2008). Furthermore, Nakaoka and Kodama (2011) have developed a measure to evaluate expectations and concerns about seeking counseling. Since these variables are often used to examine help-seeking, and their relationship with help-seeking is often pointed out (Vogel et al., 2005), it is necessary to examine their relationship with attitude towards help-seeking and help-seeking intentions.

Help-seeking preference

Help-seeking preference is defined as “the cognitive framework of whether or not an individual seeks help from experts in counseling or mental health services, professional supporters, such as teachers, or informational supporters such as friends or family, due to emotional and/or emotional problems and central problems in actual life” (Mizuno & Ishikuma, 1999). This represents the general perception of receiving assistance, and in Japan, there are many studies that were conducted from this viewpoint (e.g., Kimura & Mizuno, 2004; Mizuno, Ishikuma, & Tamura, 2006). However, this scale does not specify who provides help, but rather deals with the general perception of receiving assistance. Therefore, it is important to clarify how these general perceptions are related to attitudes and intentions for seeking help from professionals.

Previous counseling experience

Many studies have reported that attitudes toward seeking professional help become more positive, and help-seeking intentions are greater, as the individual has more experience of seeking help from professionals (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982; Fischer & Turner, 1970; Halgin, Weaver, Edell, & Spencer, 1987; Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006; Vogel et al., 2005). Similarly, those with acquaintances who have used mental health services have a higher likelihood

of seeking help (Tijhuis, Peters, & Foets, 1990). Similarly, in Japan, it has been reported that the experience of having contact with school counselors led to a positive image of school counselors (Handa, 2003; Matsuoka, 2011). These results suggest that previous contact with professionals promotes help-seeking.

However, there are some studies that reported that contact with professionals did not necessarily result in changes in attitudes (Carlton & Deane, 2000; Deane & Todd, 1996). Some of the studies reported that rather than the experience of help-seeking by itself, the satisfaction level and perceived usefulness of the experience were related to help-seeking intentions (Cusack, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2004; Deane, Skogstad, & Williams, 1999, Raviv, Raviv, Propper, & Fink, 2003). Indeed, even if an individual meets with a professional, it does not seem that attitude or intention becomes positive if the experience is negative. This is consistent with the model of help-seeking behavior where the experience of providing/receiving support in the past influences outcome expectation in the subsequent help-seeking intentions (Takagi, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to examine not only whether one has had contact with professionals, but also the quality of the contacts.

Gender

The gender of the help-seeker is one of the most common variables related to help-seeking. Basically, it has been consistently confirmed that the help-seeking was greater in women than men (Nam, Chu, Lee, Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2010). This tendency has been also reported in Japan (e.g., Nagai & Arai, 2009). However, these gender differences are mainly reported by studies about seeking help from friends or family members. When focused on seeking help from professionals, no consensus has been reached since gender differences were reported in some studies (e.g., Kimura & Mizuno, 2012), while others did not find consistent tendencies (e.g., Nakaoka, Kodama, Takada, & Ko, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the gender differences associated with seeking help from professionals.

2. Objectives

As mentioned above, help-seeking preference, expectations and concerns

about seeking counseling, the experience of seeking help from professionals, and genders are fundamental and important variables when studying attitude toward help-seeking and help-seeking intentions. However, the relationship among those variables has not been examined in Japan. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the relationship among those variables.

3. Methods

3.1 Subjects

The survey was conducted with 297 university students at two universities in the Kanto region from September to November 2012. On the cover sheet of the questionnaire, it was stated that anonymity was guaranteed, answering was arbitrary, and there was no disadvantage due to not participating in the study. Furthermore, 59 of the collected questionnaires were excluded from the analysis as there was missing data. Data of 238 (84 males, 154 females) were used.

3.2 Measures

Attitudes toward seeking professional help

We used the short Japanese version (Koike & Ito, 2012) of the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (ATSPHS; Fisher & Farina, 1995). We asked 10 questions with 4 point scales, ranging from “1: don’t agree” to “4: agree.”

Help-seeking intentions

We used the items of help-seeking preference that Kimura and Mizuno (2004) used in studies about help-seeking among university students. This presents the six major problems in university life (“interpersonal relationships,” “romance/heterosexuality,” “personality/appearance,” “health,” “future direction after graduation,” and “academic ability and skill,”) asking if an individual experiencing a problem that cannot be solved by themselves, whether he/she would ask for help. We asked them to what extent they would visit counselors on a 5-point scale, ranging from “1: unlikely” to “5: likely.”

Expectations about seeking counseling

We used an inventory for university students' expectations about seeking counseling (Nakaoka & Kodama, 2011). We asked about 4 factors with 21 items, "expectations about calming down," "expectations about assistance from professionals," "dependent expectations about solutions," and "expectations about intellectual learning" using a 5-point scale, ranging from "1: don't agree" to "5: agree."

Concerns about seeking counseling

We used an inventory for university students' concerns about seeking counseling (Nakaoka & Kodama, 2011). We asked about 3 factors with 18 items, "concerns about stigma," "concerns about coercion," and "concerns about response of counselors" using a 5-point scale, ranging from "1: don't agree" to "5: agree."

Help-seeking preference

We used a help-seeking preference scale (Tamura & Ishikuma, 2001). We asked about 2 factors with 11 items, "desire and attitude for support," and "low resistance to support," using a 5-point scale, ranging from "1: don't agree" to "5: agree."

Previous counseling experience

We first asked "Have you ever consulted with psychological professionals such as counselors?" For those who answered "Yes" to this question, we also asked about positive and negative experiences during the consultations. As for the positive experiences, we asked "When you visited counselors, how good was the experience you had?" and they responded on a 5-point scale, ranging from "1: not at all" to "5: very." As for the negative experiences, we asked "Conversely, how bad was the experience you had during consultations?" and they responded on a 5-point scale, ranging from "1: not at all" to "5: very."

4. Results

4.1 Basic analysis of each variable

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of subordinate scales of attitude towards help-seeking, help-seeking intentions, expectations and concerns about seeking counseling. As described below, descriptive statistics based on previous counseling experience were also shown in Table 1, since some variables had differences in scores depending on the previous counseling experience. As shown in Table 2, there were 45 people (18.9%) who had previous counseling experience. Comparing the mean of positive experiences and negative experiences, those with previous counseling experience had more positive experiences than negative experiences ($Mean=4.07$ $SD=1.03$ vs. $Mean=2.53$ $SD=1.10$; $t(44)=6.59$ $p<.01$).

Next, we performed two-way analysis of variance of gender (2) \times previous counseling experience (2) with attitude towards help-seeking, help-seeking intentions, expectations about seeking counseling, and concerns about seeking counseling. The main effect of previous counseling experience was observed for attitude towards help-seeking ($F(1, 234) = 6.08$ $p<.05$) and help-seeking intentions ($F(1, 234) = 17.68$ $p<.01$). Those with previous counseling experience had greater means of attitude towards help-seeking and help-seeking intentions. Furthermore, the main effect of gender ($F(1, 234) = 0.01\sim 2.47$) and interaction of gender \times previous counseling experience were not significant ($F(1, 234) = 0.01\sim 1.72$) for all variables.

4.2 Examination of relationship among each variable

Next, we examined the relationship among attitude towards help-seeking, help-seeking intentions, help-seeking expectation, and help-seeking anxiety, as well as the relationship of those variables with help-seeking preferences and past experiences of counseling.

As a result (Table 3), attitude towards help-seeking was significantly positively correlated with help-seeking intentions, expectations about calming down and expectations about assistance from professionals, and was significantly negatively correlated with all three subscales of concerns about seeking counseling. Furthermore, help-seeking intentions had positive significant correlation with expectations about calming down, dependent expectations

about solutions, and expectations about intellectual learning, and had negative significant correlation with concerns about stigma and concerns about response of counselors.

Subscales of expectations about seeking counseling were significantly positively correlated with each other. Similarly, subscales of help-seeking anxiety were significantly positively correlated with each other. Furthermore, among subscales of expectations and concerns about seeking counseling, significant negative correlations were found between expectations about calming down and concerns about coercion, between expectations about calming down and concerns about response of counselors, and between expectations about assistance from professionals and concerns about response of counselors. Furthermore, dependent expectations about solutions had significant positive correlation with concerns about stigma and concerns about coercion.

Both of the two subscales of help-seeking preference had significant positive correlation with attitude towards help-seeking, expectations about calming down, and expectations about assistance from professionals, as well as significant negative correlation with all three subscales of concerns about seeking counseling.

Furthermore, positive experiences during previous counseling experience had significant positive correlation with attitude towards help-seeking, expectations about calming down, and expectations about assistance from professionals. On the other hand, negative experiences had significant negative correlation with expectations about calming down, and had significant positive correlation with concerns about coercion and concerns about response of counselors.

4.3 Exploratory factor analysis for each variable

Lastly, for each variable used in this study, we performed exploratory factor analysis using the main factor method with promax rotation. As a result, two factors were obtained as shown in Table 4. The first factor was that each subscale of concerns about seeking counseling had negative load, and two subscales of help-seeking preference and attitude toward help-seeking had positive load. On the other hand, the second factor consisted only of each subscale of expectations about seeking counseling. However, help-seeking intentions had a low load on each factor, and thus it was not classified as any

factor.

5. Discussion

5.1 The relationship among variables in help-seeking

The results of correlation analyses mainly showed that each variable had relationships as assumed from theoretical concept. In other words, variables with positive orientation towards help-seeking, such as subscales of help-seeking intentions and expectations about seeking counseling and help-seeking preference generally had positive correlation with each other. Similarly, variables with negative orientation towards help-seeking, such as concerns about seeking counseling, had negative correlation with each other.

However, the results suggested that these positive and negative variables were not simply opposite variables. While there were many negative correlations between positive and negative variables, some other correlations were non-significant. Furthermore, the results of the factor analysis for these variables indicated two factors (the factor composed only by subscales of help-seeking expectation and the factor included attitude toward help-seeking, help-seeking preference, and concerns about seeking counseling). The correlation between those two factors were small. This result suggests that these factors of help-seeking do not stand on one axis with two poles of positive versus negative and exist independently to some extent.

Furthermore, attitudes toward help-seeking and help-seeking preference were classified to the same factor as concerns about seeking counseling, instead of expectations about seeking counseling. This result indicates that positive attitude toward help-seeking from professionals may mean “low concerns about counseling,” rather than “high expectation about counseling.”

Furthermore, there was a positive correlation, rather than a negative one, between dependent expectations about solutions, which is one of the positive variables of expectations about seeking counseling, and concerns about stigma and concerns about coercion, which are concerns about seeking counseling. This may reflect the lack of adequate knowledge on psychological problems. That is, the individual may over-recognize stigma from other people, resulting in greater concerns about stigma due to the lack of knowledge about psychological problems. Similarly, due to the lack of knowledge

about psychological problems, the individual may over-recognize the initiative of the professional, resulting in dependent expectations, as well as anxiety for the coercion from the professional. These points should be examined more in detail with considerations for knowledge of psychological problems.

Furthermore, it is a notable result that help-seeking intentions did not have a certain load on any factors. One of the primary objectives of examining the relationship among various variables of help-seeking is to clarify the deterministic factor of help-seeking. Therefore, if the variables used have weak relationships with help-seeking intentions, the usefulness of these variables may decline. Thus, a further investigation is required for the relationship of help-seeking intentions with other variables.

There are two possible ways to interpret this result. One is the possibility that attitude towards help-seeking, expectations about seeking counseling, and concerns about seeking counseling are not sufficiently related factors of help-seeking intentions, as shown in the result. Another possibility is that the results were influenced by the problems of measuring help-seeking intentions. The mean and standard deviation of the measured help-seeking intentions were 11.69 and 5.04, respectively, and the value obtained by subtracting standard deviation from mean was 6.65. Although this does not reach the criterion of the floor effect, it is quite close to the lowest value of the score range. Therefore, there is a possibility that the skewness of this distribution of help-seeking intentions score reduced the correlation coefficient. For this reason, the measurement method of help-seeking intentions should be considered in further research.

Next, as for previous counseling experience, when simply compared by the presence or absence of previous counseling experience, there was a significant difference in only attitude towards help-seeking and help-seeking intentions. On the other hand, when we examined the relationship with experience during such consultations, those with more positive experiences had greater expectations about calming down and expectations about assistance from professionals in expectations about seeking counseling. Furthermore, those with more negative experiences had lower expectations about calming down in expectations about seeking counseling, and had greater concerns about coercion and concerns about response of counselors in concerns about seeking counseling. These results were consistent with the previous study (Deane et al., 1999), suggesting that favorable experience with professionals

may promote help-seeking. These results can be a useful perspective while developing intervention strategies of help-seeking among Japanese university students.

Lastly, no gender differences were found in this study. As mentioned above, gender differences in help-seeking from professionals in Japan are often not clearly indicated. Unlike help-seeking from informal resources such as friends and family members, there is a possibility that there is no definite gender difference in help-seeking.

5.2 Future directions and limitations

The present study can expand previous findings about seeking help from professionals among Japanese university students. In particular, it was found that each variable was roughly classified into two factors, and that although attitude toward help-seeking was related to lower reluctance, help-seeking intentions were not classified to any factor. These results indicate the conceptual properties of attitude in help-seeking and help-seeking intentions. However, a measurement problem was also indicated for help-seeking intentions. In future studies, we need to measure help-seeking intentions with more appropriate methods to obtain optimal distribution, and to consider the knowledge of psychological problems in order to examine the relationships between variables in more detail.

Table1—Descriptive statistics of each variable

		Previous counseling experience				Total	
		Yes n=45		No n=193		N=238	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	Attitude toward help-seeking	27.58	(4.25)	26.01	(3.86)	26.30	(3.98)
	Help-seeking intentions	14.80	(5.81)	10.97	(4.56)	11.69	(5.04)
Expectations	Expectations about calming down	30.13	(4.57)	30.42	(4.73)	30.37	(4.69)
	Expectations about assistance from professionals	18.56	(3.12)	18.89	(3.46)	18.82	(3.39)
	Dependent expectations about solutions	12.76	(4.42)	13.54	(3.74)	13.39	(3.88)
	Expectations about intellectual learning	9.67	(2.49)	9.03	(2.66)	9.15	(2.64)
Concerns	Concerns about stigma	22.02	(7.43)	23.93	(8.79)	23.57	(8.56)
	Concerns about coercion	9.29	(3.70)	10.08	(3.97)	9.93	(3.92)
	Concerns about response of counselors	6.67	(2.82)	6.81	(2.19)	6.78	(2.32)

Table3—Intercorrelations among main variables

		Attitude toward help-seeking	Help-seeking intentions
Help-seeking intentions		.26**	
Expectations	Expectations about calming down	.22**	.13*
	Expectations about assistance from professionals	.21**	.10
	Dependent expectations about solutions	.05	.15*
	Expectations about intellectual learning	.00	.17**
Concerns	Concerns about stigma	-.20**	-.15*
	Concerns about coercion	-.18**	-.04
	Concerns about response of counselors	-.22**	-.16*
Help-seeking preference	Desire and attitude for support	.26**	.17
	Low hesitation about receiving support	.13*	.02
Experience of counseling	Positive experience	.55**	.27
	Negative experience	-.20	-.25

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Table2—The number of subjects used in the ANOVA

		Male	Female
Previous counseling experience	Yes	12	33
	No	72	121

Expectations about seeking counseling				Concerns about seeking counseling		
Calming down	Assistance from professionals	Dependent solutions	Intellectual learning	Stigma	Coercion	Response of counselors
.65**						
.41**	.47**					
.24**	.23**	.20**				
-.11	-.07	.24**	.07			
-.19**	-.05	.15*	.12	.52**		
-.37**	-.31**	-.12	.03	.39**	.49**	
.25**	.27**	.02	-.03	-.29**	-.22**	-.27**
.16*	.20**	-.04	-.04	-.32**	-.30**	-.40**
.36*	.34*	.09	-.11	-.17	-.05	-.27
-.40**	-.09	-.25	.10	.17	.49**	.42**

Table4—Factor analysis for variables used in this study

	Factor I	Factor II
Concerns about stigma	-.71	.24
Concerns about coercion	-.68	.18
Concerns about response of counselors	-.63	-.15
Low hesitation about receiving support	.58	.00
Desire and attitude for support	.52	.11
Attitude toward help-seeking	.31	.14
Expectations about assistance from professionals	.15	.75
Expectations about calming down	.23	.69
Dependent expectations about solutions	-.22	.69
Expectations about intellectual learning	-.14	.35
Help-seeking intentions	.15	.17
	Correlation between factors	.23

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