

Psychological Health Seeking Behaviours of Public and Private Undergraduate Students in Two Selected Universities in Osun State.

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Abstract

Mental health issues are very rampant and on the increase in tertiary institutions. The study investigated the health seeking behavior of mental distress cases among undergraduates in public and private universities in Osun State, Nigeria. This study was conducted among 488 respondents from a public university and 422 respondents from a private university in Osun State, using a comparative cross-sectional research design. Multistage sampling technique was employed to select respondents for the study. Information was collected with the use of pre-tested semi-structured self-administered questionnaire. Data were analyzed using frequency count and percentage and t-test. The result of the study revealed that the proportion of respondents with mental distress that have ever sought professional help from formal sources was 13.7% in public university, and 15.8% in the private university, while informal sources was 86.3 % in public university, and 84.2 % in the private university. Furthermore, those that had sought mental distress help in the last 12 months from informal sources was: private (78.8 %), public university, (88.3 %). While formal sources were: 11.7% (Public) and 21.2% (private). The study concluded that undergraduates in both private and public universities in the study area sought help for mental distress mostly from informal sources.

. Key Words: Mental Distress; Health Seeking; behavior, formal; informal, Tertiary Institution; Osun State

Introduction

Help-seeking is defined as a behavior of actively seeking help from other people. In the mental health context, help-seeking is defined as an adaptive coping process that is the attempt to obtain external assistance to deal with a mental health concern. There are two dimensions to help seeking. It could be formal or informal. The formal help seeking is when professional assistance is sought. It may include a wide range of professionals (both health and non-health professionals) depending on the issue of concern. Examples include specialist, generalist health care providers, teachers, clergy, community and youth workers. The informal help seeking on the other hand is when assistance is sought from non-professionals. This includes help sought from informal social networks, such as

friends and family. (Rickwood, Thomas, and Bradford, 2012). The consequences of mental distress could be enormous and therefore, the timely management of mental distress among young people in tertiary institutions cannot be overemphasized. The major challenge in the management of mental distress among young people is for them to seek professional help (formal sources). Most students who have mental distress do not receive any therapeutic or counselling service. Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, and Golberstein, (2009). This is most likely because they do not seek professional help. For instance, a study in Pakistan reported that medical students are reluctant to seek appropriate help for mental health problems because they consider it a form of weakness to seek help. (Jadoon, Yaqoob, Raza, Shehzad, and Choudhry, 2010). Another study conducted among law students in Australia reported that only about four in ten (39.1%) will seek professional help if they were to experience depression. (Norm, Sharon and Hickie, 2010). A survey done in America in 2006 which included campuses reported that less than 50% of the students who seriously considered suicide the previous year received no form of professional help. (Drum, Brownson, Burton, Denmark, Smith, 2009). The findings from the above studies showed that university students generally are not inclined to seek professional help even when they are aware of the need to do so. Although researches in developed countries have shown an increasing trend in the help-seeking behaviour of young people in tertiary institution concerning their mental health problems. (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010). According to Kitzrow, (2003) there is still a disproportionate match between the prevalence of students with mental health problems and their health service utilization which stands as a proxy for the professional help-seeking. (Rickwood, Thomas, and Bradford, 2012) In a survey conducted in Australia among those aged 16–24 years revealed that 23% of the young men reported a mental disorder but only 13% of these young men sought professional help, while for the females, 31% reported a mental disorder with only 30% of these young women seeking professional help. (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson and Ciarrochi, 2005) In developing countries, the issue of data on trend of help-seeking behaviour on mental distress is not yet a matter for discussion as there are barely studies to assess the help-seeking behaviour of students concerning their health in general. It is one thing to decide to seek help and another to decide to seek help from formal sources (professionals) especially with issues of mental health, which is generally considered stigmatizing. A study on adolescent help-seeking behaviour on matters relating to mental distress showed that adolescents are more willing to refer others to seek help than themselves. (Raviv, Sills, Raviv, and Wilansky, 2000) Adolescents were also more willing to refer themselves and others for help for severe problem than for minor problem while girls were more willing than boys to seek help for themselves. Concerning source of referral, adolescents were most willing to seek help and advice others to seek help from their friends, parent and psychologist in that order. (Raviv, Sills, Raviv, and Wilansky, 2000). This report showed that young people would rather seek help from informal sources, (family, friends) than formal sources. Other contributory factors include economic status, gender, social network, protracted waiting time at the health center and health provider's attitude. (Afolabi, Daropale, Irinoye, and Adegoke, 2013; Uzochukwu and Onwujekwe, 2004; Norm, Sharon and Hickie, 2010). Research has shown that belief also act as a barrier to the help-seeking behaviour of students with mental distress. Some students do not seek help because they believe they do not need treatment. (Eisenberg,

Golberstein, Gollust Prins et al, 2007) review of some studies on the impact of patient belief on treatment reported that 16% to 51% of individuals with significant symptoms of depression or anxiety believed that they did not need treatment.²⁰ Another study done among students on health seeking behaviour and perception of health care services in a university community revealed that cost of care, protracted waiting time, inadequate health information, unfriendly attitude of healthcare workers, drug shortage and nature of ailment are factors that influences their health seeking behavior (Dearing, Maddux and Tangney, 2005). Here it was observed that stigmatization was not considered as a factor. This could be because the study was on general health care seeking behaviour and not specific to mental health. Vogel et al however reported in their study that stigma was a major barrier to seeking help for students with emotional problems

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria does not have a national initiative addressing or promoting mental health in higher institutions. However, the national mental health policy has a provision for partnership between the health and education sectors, which bothers on promotion of mental health in schools and universities using the three basic levels of prevention, including prevention of suicide. It also considers the need for the care plan of mentally ill students to give attention to their educational needs. (Federal Ministry of Health, 2015). Mental health services were provided mainly in hospitals. While task shifting was recommended by the policy, little has been done in the field of mental health as most primary health care centers basically offers referral services. The purpose of this study is to investigate the help seeking sources for mental health issues by university students in Osun State, Nigeria.

Methodology

This study was a comparative cross-sectional research design. The population consisted of undergraduate students of the two selected universities (public and private) in Osun State. The sample size comprised of 900 respondents (Private University 420; Public University, 480) the multistage sampling procedure was adopted for the study. From Obafemi Awolowo University, 13 departments were selected from the existing Faculties using proportional allocation method while the same sampling technique was used to select one department each from the eight existing Faculties in Bowen University, Iwo.

The research instrument for the study was a semi structured questionnaire adapted from General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ). The questionnaire was in two sections based on the information provided: Section A focused on questions concerning demographic, social and other characteristics of respondents Section B focused on questions on Help-seeking behaviour by respondents in the past 12 months. The data was collected over a period of two weeks in each of the universities. The questionnaires were self-administered in the lecture rooms. The data obtained were analysed using frequency count, percentages and t-test statistics.

Results

Table 1: 1 Selection of Students in the Department Using Proportional Allocation Method for Public University

s/n	Faculty	Selected Department	Population size (A)	Sample size by proportional allocation $A) \times 0.063$
1.	Agricultural Science	Agriculture Economics	238	15
2.	Environmental design	Architecture	235	14
3.	Dentistry	Dentistry	179	12
4.	Social Science	Economics	556	35
5.	Art	English	1706	108
6.	Administration	International Relations	395	25
7.	Law	Law	1734	109
8.	Technology and information	Mechanical Engineering	417	27
9.	Clinical science	Medicine	652	42
10.	Basic science	Nursing	488	31
11.	Education	Physical Education	92	7
12.	Pharmacy	Pharmacy	713	44
13.	Science	Zoology	293	19
	Total		7698	488

Table 1:2 Selection of Students in the Department Using Proportional Allocation Method for Private University

s/n	Faculty	Selected Department	Population size (A)	Sample size by proportional allocation (A) X 0.3
1.	Agriculture	Agriculture	90	28
2.	Basic clinical science	Economics and Extension Anatomy	88	25
3.	Science and science education	Microbiology	287	86
4.	Social and management science	Economics	260	77
5.	Humanity	English	82	24
6.	Law	Law	205	62
7.	Clinical health science	Medicine	301	92
8.	Basic medical science	Physiology	92	28
Total			1405	422

Tables 1 and 2 are the results of the selection process of respondents from the two selected universities. Table 1: Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (Public) and Table 2: Bowen University, Iwo (Private)

Table 3: Comparison of the categories of source of help seeking by respondents with mental distress in public and private universities in Osun State

Category of the source of help seeking	Public (n=197) freq %		Private (n=184) freq %		Test statistics p value
For ever sought help:					
Informal	170	86.3	155	84.2	$\chi^2=0.321$, p=0.571 df=1
Formal (professional)	27	13.7	29	15.8	
For sought help in the past 12 months:					
Informal	174	88.3	145	78.8	$\chi^2=6.329$, p=0.012 df=1
Formal (professional)	23	11.7	39	21.2	

For intention to seek help in future:

Informal	67	34.0	64	34.8	$\chi^2 = 0.025$, $p=0.874$ $df=1$
Formal (professional)	130	66.0	120	65.2	

Table 3 showed the help seeking behaviour of the respondents. The proportion of respondents with mental distress that have ever sought professional help from formal sources was 13.7% in public university, and 15.8% in the private university, while informal sources was 86.3 % in public university, and 84.2 % in the private university. Furthermore, those that had sought mental distress help in the last 12 months from informal sources was: private (78.8 %), public university, (88.3 %). While formal sources were: 11.7% (Public) and 21.2% (private). There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of respondents with mental distress in public and private universities that have ever sought professional help ($p=0.571$). A significantly higher proportion of respondents in private university have sought help from informal sources ($p= 0.012$). About two thirds of respondents in either of the universities have intention to seek professional help if mentally distressed, and there was no statistically significant difference in their intention to seek help ($p=0.874$). Conclusively, the result from the study revealed that most of the respondents both in private and public university sought help for mental distress mostly from informal sources.

Discussion

All the respondents with mental distress in this study had sought help for mental distress in the last 12 months prior to the survey. However, the key point in help seeking for mental distress and other mental health problems is not just seeking help but the source of help sought. (Eisenberg, Golberstein and Gollust, 2007). The sources of help sought for mental distress in the past 12 months in both universities were similar in pattern. Respondents in public and private universities commonly sought informal sources for help. This finding is supported by study among adolescents in Tel Aviv, Israel, which reported that young people are more disposed to seeking help from family and friends than from professionals. (Raviv, Sills, Raviv and Wilansky, 2000). This was also similar to findings of Norm, Sharon and Hickie, (2010) which reported that majority of Australian law students would rather seek help from informal sources with family and friends as the leading options of sources of help-seeking. Only a few of the respondents with mental distress in either public or private university sought help from formal sources (professionals) in the last 12 months. Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer, & Zivin. (2011) also stated that university students are not inclined to seek professional help even when they are aware they need to. The possible explanation to the finding in this study could be that mental health services are not available so the students cannot seek professional help or they are available but the students are either not aware or not willing to use the services for fear of stigmatisation. The implication of this finding is that there is need to explore reasons for not seeking professional help among this group.

The proportion of respondents that have ever sought help from formal sources was similarly low in both universities. However, a significantly higher proportion of

respondents with mental distress in private university have sought help from formal sources in the last 12 months compared with their counterparts in public university. This might be due to possibly functioning counselling services available in the private as compared to the public university where there is a non-functioning counselling unit. Conversely, a significantly higher proportion of respondents in public university have sought help from spiritual leaders in the last 12 months compared with those in private university. The non-functionality of counselling services in public university might leave the respondents in public university with an alternative option of seeking spiritual help. While the need to create demand for seeking professional help cannot be over emphasized, the supply aspect must also be given due attention especially in the public university where the counselling unit is non-functional. Universities should prioritize the mental health of their students by putting in place structures to provide for the mental health needs and make these structures easily accessible and acceptable to the students. About two thirds of respondents in both universities reported intention to seek help from formal sources when they experience mental distress in the future. However, this does not agree with the finding in this study that showed that only about a third of respondents with mental distress in public university have sought help from formal sources in the past 12 months. There is the possibility that they might not recognize that they have mental distress or that they were providing answers as expected.

Conclusion

The study concluded that undergraduates in both private and public universities in the study area sought help for mental distress mostly from informal sources.

Recommendation

Base on the findings of the study it was recommended that;

- the guidance and counselling units in the public university should be made functional
- The university management should also provide accessible counseling unit and youth friendly basic mental health services in the university health facilities.
- Mental health support groups should be established in universities to assist students who are having difficulties with academic and social life in the universities.
- There should be regular awareness and training programmes on mental health issues among students
- Mental health resources should be made available and accessible to students.
- Mentorship programmes that can assist the students should be instituted
- University could partner with external agencies to promote mental wellbeing of the students.
- Mental health support groups or initiative run and driven by students should be established. Universities could also partner with external agencies promoting mental wellbeing.
- The university could also set up a student mental health advisory committee.

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