

Influence of Socio-Demographic Factors on the Beliefs and Attitudes of Male Students towards Help-Seeking in Universities

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Abstract

Young male adults in the tertiary institution are often reticent to seek help for their psychological concerns. It is necessary to investigate beliefs and attitudes underlying male students' decision to seek or not to seek help, to increase understanding about why this occurrence is so. This study aimed to examine the

influence of socio-demographic variables on the beliefs and attitudes of male students towards help-seeking within a University in Nigeria. A standardized questionnaire examining beliefs, attitudes as well as factors that influence help-seeking behaviours of male students in Nigeria was used to elicit responses from 323 male students from all faculties and across all levels. Analysis of data revealed that religion, family type and previous counselling experience demographic variables had a significant influence on the beliefs and attitudes of male students towards help-seeking. Practitioners and policymakers attempting to improve male students' help-seeking behaviour need to pay more attention to underlying factors that influence help-seeking. This understanding will assist them in designing tailor-made intervention programmes to enhance help-seeking.

Keywords: Help-seeking, Male Students, Counselling, Higher Institution, Wellbeing.

Introduction

Research investigating the percentage of students who seek assistance for educational and career-related problems indicates that many students turn to other sources to get this help (Al-bahrani, 2014). Studies have shown that career and educational concerns constitute an essential need faced by learners in the higher institutions in Nigeria (Bolu-Steve 2016; Vertsberger and Gati 2016). Research reports from the global North indicate a steep rise in the demands for counselling services among university students over the last decade (Bostwick, 2014; Ketchen, Gaddis, Heinz, Beck & Eseinberg, 2015). In several studies conducted in the United States, it was revealed that more than three-fourths of tertiary institutions reported an escalation in the acuteness of students' psychological problems (Davis, Gallagher, & Cohen, 2000; Dunne et al., 2017). A recent study conducted by the Institute of Public Policy Research on mental health problems of students in United Kingdom universities in 2017 revealed a 79% increase in suicide rates as well as 210% increase in dropout rates between 2009 and 2015. In Nigeria, Adewuya, Ola, Coker et al. (2016) reported that individuals between the ages of 15-49 have the highest suicide incidence, with males in this report having the highest number of victims.

The above-stated statistics point to the challenges bedevilling students within the higher learning context. These reports substantiate the evidence of psychological distress and mental health challenges on university campuses as a result of multiple issues these young adults are grappling with. However, despite the enormity of the challenges faced by these students, only a small fragment of the population utilises the counselling services provided within the institutions (Gorski, 2010; Seidler et al., 2016; Mcdermott et al., 2017; Davies, Beaver and Glazebrook, 2018)

Scholars have argued that more than 75% of students in need of counselling services are not accessing the services provided within their institutions of higher education (Gaughf, Smith, & Williams, 2013).

Specifically, with the Nigerian context, an aversion towards seeking counselling help has been observed. An earlier study conducted implicated school administrators as the greatest obstacle to counselling services within schools, because of their misconceptions about the functions of a counsellor, thus posing a hindrance to the counsellors' core function (Adimula, 1988). Furthermore, in more recent research, secondary school students in the south-eastern part of Nigeria were found to have a negative attitude towards seeking counsellors' help (Eyo, Joshua & Esuong, 2010). The authors further speculate that the negative attitude might be a result of non-awareness and unfamiliarity about the services provided by counsellors. In addition to this, a common belief among the study participants was that counselling services are meant for individuals with psychiatric problems.

Similarly, in a study conducted in Nigeria by Agi (2015), revealed that 72.5% of the secondary school students who participated in the survey had an unfavourable attitude toward utilisation of counselling services. A further probe into this also shows a deficiency in the knowledge and awareness of counselling service in secondary schools. A study conducted at a university in South-West Nigeria suggested the need to raise awareness about the counselling service within the University so that more students can access the centre for their needs (Lasode, Lawal, & Ofodile, 2017). These studies presented here might be indicative of the current level of awareness and knowledge about counselling services in Nigeria's higher institutions. It is therefore inferred that this lack of knowledge and awareness of psychological counselling services has led many Nigerians to seek help from pastors, traditional healers, and other non-formalised sources of support at the first notice of any distress (Meniru & Schwartz, 2018). In fact, this behaviour makes one wonder about the underlying factors behind the attitude and perception towards counselling help-seeking. Literature search on counselling help-seeking behaviour in Nigeria revealed no single study on socio-demographic factors responsible for the attitudes and beliefs of male students towards help-seeking. This absence of substantial literature on help-seeking, specifically on male students, has left practitioners and researchers alike with very little useful information about the underlying factors that enhance as well as impede counselling help-seeking. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study, therefore, examined the socio-demographic factors influencing attitudes and beliefs towards help-seeking behaviours in Nigeria.

Research Questions

In a bid to understand the issues identified in the study, two primary research questions were posed;

1. What are the beliefs of male students about counselling help-seeking in Nigeria Universities?
2. What are the attitudes of male students towards counselling help-seeking in Nigeria Universities?

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards counselling help-seeking behaviour based on faculty type.
2. There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards help-seeking behaviour based on religion.
3. There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards help-seeking behaviour based on the family type.
4. There is no significant difference in the attitude of male students with previous counselling experience and those without previous counselling experience.

Research Procedure

This study adopted the survey design as the research design in this study. The survey method allowed the researcher to select a large sample that is representative of the male students in the chosen University. This is done to gain a comprehensive insight into the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of male students about counselling help-seeking. As stated above, this study specifically utilised the questionnaire as a means of eliciting information from the 323 male students out of about 10,000 male students across Faculties and levels in the University. Cluster sampling was used at first to select faculties that were involved, while the random sampling technique was used to select participants from those initially selected faculties. This method afforded the researcher the opportunity to select male students across all the faculties to address the issue of representation and to allow for the generalisability of the research findings.

A self-designed questionnaire named "Enabling Environment for Counselling Help-seeking Questionnaire" was used in eliciting responses from male students concerning the phenomenon that is studied. An extensive literature review guided the design of the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of four sections (A-D). Section A contained five items which comprised information detailing their year of study, faculty of study, the participants' family type and their religious demographics while section B contained four items dealing with the frequency of their visit to the unit, the types of concerns they took to the counsellor and the level of severity of the concern. Section C comprised 27 of items relating to the male student's attitudes and beliefs towards counselling help-seeking while section D, which dealt with elements of an enabling environment, contained 20 items. A 7- point Likert scale was adopted. The responses for each section were patterned differently. In section A, participants were expected to fill in their details while in section B, structured questions were asked, and participants were required to select one or more responses that fitted them. Section C responses were patterned after a 7-point Likert rating scale with options of very true of me (7 points), true of me (6 points), somewhat true of me (5 points), neutral (4 points), somewhat untrue of me (3 points), untrue of me (2 points) and very untrue of me (1 point). The section D responses were also patterned after a 7-point Likert scale but with different options. They are strongly agreed (7 points), agreed (6 points), somewhat agree (5 points), neutral (4 points), somewhat disagree (3 points) disagree (2 points), and strongly disagree (1 point).

The validity and reliability of the designed questionnaire were achieved using expert performance study and pilot study, respectively. The selected experts are academic faculty

members in the fields of guidance and counselling, psychology of education, and tests and measurements. They all agreed on the final copy used for this study. For the pilot study, 30 copies of the instrument were administered to randomly selected male students in a higher learning. The Cronbach alpha was used to estimate the reliability of this instrument. A reliability coefficient of 0.9 was achieved. Data collected via this questionnaire using appropriate statistical measures of percentages, mean ranking, t-test and ANOVA. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Free State, with approval reference UFS-HSD2018/1104. Permission to conduct the research was also sought from the authorities of the selected State University, and consent letters given to all participants to ascertain their willingness to participate in the research. Participants were informed of their rights to exit the research process any time they felt the need to do so.

Findings of the Study

Research Question 1: *What are the beliefs of male students about counselling help-seeking in the tertiary institution in Nigeria?*

Table 1: Mean and rank order analyses of the beliefs of male students towards counselling help-seeking

Item No	Item description	Mean±SD	Rank
3	I do not believe a counsellor knows about my problem more than I do	4.84±1.85	1 st
5	I believe a normal man should be able to solve his problems	4.75±1.83	2 nd
13	I think the counsellors are there to help people with mental illness	4.50±2.03	3 rd
26	I have always known that males have a way of dealing with their challenges without seeking any professional help	4.49±1.71	4 th
11	I think emotional or psychological issues will go away with time	4.46±1.83	5 th
27	My parents gave me the impression that I should be able to handle my personal issues	4.4±1.82	6 th
25	I believe religion can proffer a solution to most of my difficult issues	4.36±1.78	7 th
4	Going to a counsellor for help is like handing over my power to someone else	4.05±1.94	8 th
17	Other people might find out what I have gone to discuss with the counsellor	3.95±1.90	9 th
10	I think emotional or psychological issues are not a big deal	3.84±1.86	10 th
18	I think the help of a professional counsellor would be inadequate or unhelpful	3.79±1.87	11 th
15	I think my problems/difficulties with a professional counsellor would worsen the situation	3.68±1.89	12 th
16	My peers will think I am stupid for not knowing how to resolve my own problems	3.66±1.85	13 th
24	I think the counsellors' office is too exposed/open	3.62±1.87	14 th
22	I think the counsellors here are not competent enough to handle my difficulties	3.60±1.79	15 th
19	Going to a counsellor's office can tarnish my image with my peers	3.35±1.91	16 th

To identify which of the items pertaining to beliefs of male student elicited the strongest responses in the study population, the mean score of each item was calculated and ranked. Table 1 outlines the mean of each item, the mean rank order analysis showed that self-reliance and independence, subscribing to masculinity scripts, misconception about the role of a counsellor and problem minimisation were the prominent participants' beliefs in counselling help-seeking. Concern about stigmatisation, competency of the counsellor as well as the location of the counselling were the least ranked beliefs of male students.

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes of male students towards counselling help-seeking in a higher learning ecology?

Table 2: Mean and rank order analysis of the attitudes of male students towards counselling help-seeking

Item No.	Item description	Mean±SD	Rank
2	I feel more responsible for solving my problems than when I am seeking help from a professional counsellor	4.92±1.78	1 st
6	I do not like to display my emotions before anyone	4.86±1.82	2 nd
14	I would rather talk to my religious leader, family and friends rather than go to professional counsellors that I do not know at all	4.45±1.93	3 rd
12	Confiding in someone about my intimate issues does not seem right with me	4.40±1.84	4 th
8	I would rather keep my feelings and problems to myself rather than talking to a counsellor	4.14±1.94	5 th
23	I do not know the types of services provided by the counselling centre	4.09±1.92	6 th
7	Expressing my emotion to a counsellor is a sign of weakness	3.99±1.88	7 th
9	I do not trust a professional counsellors' ability to help resolve my difficulties	3.96±1.81	8 th
21	I do not know where the counselling centre is located	3.80±2.0	9 th
20	I would not like discussing my issues with a female counsellor	3.73±1.93	10 th
1	I would feel bad about myself for needing a counsellors' help	3.62±1.91	11 th

Regarding the mean of each of the items, Tables 2 shows that item 2 'I feel more responsible for solving my problems than when I am seeking help from a professional counsellor' had the highest mean, with a mean±SD of 4.92±1.78. However, item 1, which states that 'I would feel bad about myself for needing a counsellor's help', was the least ranked, with a mean of 3.62. It is important to note that, even though this item was ranked lowest, it had a mean above 3.5, which shows its closeness to the average. Therefore, attitudes relating to the need for independence, unwillingness to display emotion, privacy concerns, preference for keeping their problems to

themselves, and preference to discuss with religious leaders stood out from the data set as typical of male students' attitudes towards help-seeking.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards counselling help-seeking behaviour based on faculty type.

For easy analysis and concise presentation, the initial faculties from where data was collected were regrouped into Humanities, Pure Sciences, and Medicine. The criteria for the grouping was done based on their commonalities in terms of the subject matter being taught in each faculty. For instance, the Humanities group comprised faculties, where studies relate to human beings and their social life. Medicine stood alone because it is assumed that students within that group might be more inclined towards help-seeking because of the nature of their training. The Pure Sciences group was categorised using that criterion as well.

Table 3: Showing the distribution of the faculty groupings

Groups of Faculties	Faculties in each group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Humanities	Arts, Education, Social Sciences, Management Science and Law	186	57.6
Pure Sciences	Science, Agricultural Sciences and Engineering	99	30.7
Medicine	College of Medicine	38	9.9
Total		323	100.0

The table below shows that for beliefs ($f = 1.373$, $p > 0.05$) and for attitudes ($f = 0.627$, $p > 0.05$), that there is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of male students in the selected faculties. Thus, the null hypothesis is not rejected; this implies that there is insufficient statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 3.1: One-way ANOVA comparing beliefs and attitudes of male students towards Help-Seeking, by faculty

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Beliefs	Between Groups	2.803	2	1.401	1.373	0.255
	Within Groups	326.731	320	1.021		
	Total	329.534	322			
Attitudes	Between Groups	1.405	2	0.703	.627	0.535
	Within Groups	358.411	320	1.120		
	Total	359.817	322			

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards help-seeking behaviour based on religion.

The result in Table 3.1 shows that there is a significant difference in the beliefs ($t = -3.03$, $P < 0.05$) and attitudes ($t = -2.450$, $p < 0.05$) of Christian and Muslim students towards counselling help-seeking. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternate hypothesis, which states that there is a significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of male students towards help-seeking based on their faculty. It implies that beliefs and attitudes of Christian and Muslim male students towards beliefs towards counselling help-seeking differs. The table shows that, on the average, Muslim students have a stronger belief system than the Christian students. From this, it can allude that Muslims beliefs towards counselling help-seeking were negative and unfavourable.

Table 4: Results of independent sample t-test comparing the beliefs of male students towards help-seeking based on religion

	Religion	N	Mean \pm SD	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	t-cal	t-tab	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Beliefs	Christianity	277	4.02 \pm 0.10	321	.003	-3.03	1.960	-.48622	-.8017	-.1707
	Islam	45	4.51 \pm 1.00							
Attitudes	Christianity	277	4.12 \pm 1.05		.015	-2.45		-.41119	-.74137	-.08102
	Islam	45	4.53 \pm 0.99							

***P>0.05, n=323**

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards help-seeking behaviour based on family type

The result in Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference in the belief ($t = -2.747$, $P < 0.05$) and attitudes ($t = -2.131$, $p < 0.05$) of male students from monogamous and polygamous family towards counselling help-seeking. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternate hypothesis 'there is a significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of male students towards help-seeking. These statistics imply that male students from monogamous and polygamous family have different beliefs and attitudes towards counselling help-seeking. The means of the male students from monogamous families were higher for both beliefs and attitudes. It depicts a non-favourable belief and attitude towards counselling help-seeking.

Table 5: Results of independent sample t-test comparing beliefs and attitudes of male students towards HELP-SEEKING based on the family type

	Family Type	N	Mean \pm SD	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	t-cal	t-tab	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Beliefs	Monogamy	242	4.01 \pm 0.98	.006	321	-2.747	1.960	-.35311	-.60604	-0.10019
	Polygamy	81	4.36 \pm 1.05							
Attitudes	Monogamy	242	4.11 \pm 1.02	.034		-2.131		-.28761	-.55311	-.02210
	Polygamy	81	4.40 \pm 1.13							

***P<0.05, n=323**

Hypothesis Four: There is no significant difference in the attitude of those with prior counselling help-seeking experience and those without prior counselling experience.

The independent sample t-test analysis performed on the attitude of male students who have gone for counselling and those who have not gone shows that there is a statistically significant difference in their attitudes towards help-seeking ($t = -2.413$; $p < 0.05$). An inspection of the mean scores indicates that those that have gone for counselling had a higher mean (4.4276; $SD = 1.06992$) than those who have not gone to counselling ($M = 4.1026$; $SD = 1.06992$).

Table 6: Results of an independent t-test comparing the attitudes of those with previous counselling experience and those without it

	Counselling experience	N	Mean±SD	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	t-cal	t-tab	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Attitude	Not gone for counselling	242	4.10±1.04	321	0.016	-	1.960	-.32505	-.59004	-.6007
	Have gone for counselling	81	4.43±1.07		0.019	2.413		-.32505	-.59494	-.05517

Discussion of Results

Hypothesis one: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards counselling help-seeking behaviour based on faculty type.

The result of this hypothesis testing is displayed in Table 4. The table indicates a statistically insignificant difference in the attitudes and beliefs of students towards help-seeking across different faculties. There has been little research work conducted with regard to this hypothesis in the literature. Hence, the researcher could not find one to compare the outcome of this outcome. Nonetheless, this finding is that students across faculties do not differ in their attitudes and beliefs towards seeking help. A closely related study was conducted among medical and non-medical students in Sri-Lanka. The finding of their research could be used to corroborate the outcome of this hypothesis. Amarasuriya, Jorm, and Reavley (2015) examine perceptions and intentions to seek help from medical and non-medical students. Their study revealed an absence of any significant difference in their intention to seek help between medical and non-medical students. However, the beliefs of medical students differed as compared to non-medical students because they had a more constructive and affirmative perception about the benefits of seeking help, also they had more inclination to seek help from informal sources.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards counselling help-seeking behaviour based on religion.

This hypothesis was rejected because this study demonstrated a significant difference in the help-seeking beliefs and attitudes of male students. Studies have shown that people with less

conservative spiritual beliefs are more open to seeking help from professionals than those that are not (Amri & Bemak, 2012; Leavey, Loewenthal, & King, 2016; Plunkett, 2009). Studies specifically exploring the difference between help-seeking behaviour of Christians and Muslims are not so common. However, some research has explored the links between religion and help-seeking. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2011) compared mental health help-seeking behaviour of Arab university students in Israel across the three main religions (Christianity, Islam and Druze). Their study indicated that there is a significant difference in the attitudes of those of the three religions. They found out that Christian students, in comparison with Muslim and Druze students, were higher in interpersonal openness, less inclined to stigmatise help-seeking and had fewer opportunities to resort to traditional healing systems.

This finding confirms this previous research that Muslim students had more unfavourable attitudes and beliefs towards help-seeking, as compared with their Christian counterparts. Rogers-Sirin et al. (2017) explain psychological help-seeking among Muslims. They found, in their study, that collectivist family values and high religiosity explained the reticent of Muslims towards psychological help-seeking. However, with regards to Christians' positive attitudes, there has not been consistent research all over the literature. Darroch (2011) found out that Christians with more liberal ideals are more open towards help-seeking than those with conservative ideals. Therefore, we could explain the positive attitude of Christians in this study to the possession of more liberal Christian ideals. Adams et al. (2018) also clarified in their study that Christian orthodoxy is positively correlated to help-seeking and non-stigmatisation of help-seeking, while religious fundamentalism is related to prejudice and stigma against help-seeking.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of males towards counselling help-seeking behaviour based on the family type.

This study predicted a non-significant difference in the help-seeking beliefs and attitudes of male students based on the family type. However, the hypothesis was rejected, as a significant difference was noticed in their beliefs and attitudes. Cometto (2014) asserts that the level of family cohesion, flexibility, and communication could influence help-seeking attitudes and beliefs of male students because these factors have the tendency of making them more or less vulnerable to mental health problems that could make them warrant the need to seek help. Studies have linked poor life expectancies and distressing mental health with being from a polygamous family (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2011; Al-Sharfi, Mohammad, Pfeffer & Miller, 2016; Shepard, 2012). A thorough literature search yielded no results in terms of any study specifically undertaken to compare the help-seeking behaviour of male students from monogamous and polygamous families. As evident from the hypotheses testing, male students from polygamous families had a more unfavourable attitude towards help-seeking than those from monogamous families. Ekane (2013) argues that families within African cultures are often extended or polygamous in nature, and are characterised by deep values of collectivism. Hence, we could speculatively explain the non-help seeking behaviour of male students in this study, has been influenced by the presence of abundant social support or network. In corroboration with this speculation, Brown et al. 's (2014) study found a higher correlation between informal help-seeking and higher social network. Hedge, Sianko, and McDonell's (2016) study also corroborated this finding that the informal help-seeking

is positively correlated with a larger social network or social support system. From the foregoing, it can, therefore, be concluded that polygamous families that are guided by the values of togetherness and close attachment might not place importance on seeking help or expressing their problems to people outside their circle or family unit.

Hypothesis Four: There is no significant difference in the attitude of male students with previous counselling experience and those without previous counselling experience.

The statistical test carried out on this revealed a statistically significant difference between the attitudes of male students who have had previous counselling experience and those that have not had. The literature is consistent about the judgement of people with prior positive counselling experience. People with prior positive experience tend to have more positive attitudes towards help-seeking, while those people with negative experiences had a negative attitude towards help-seeking. The findings of this study, however, show that participants with previous counselling experience had an unfavourable and negative attitude towards help-seeking. In contrast, those who have not had any prior counselling experience had a more pleasant experience. It can, therefore, be implied or assumed from this finding that participants in this study who have had previous counselling experience had a negative experience, thus explaining their negative attitude towards help-seeking. In contrast, those who have not had any prior experience are optimistic about it. However, this requires a deeper investigation to ascertain the cause of a negative attitude for this particular set of participants.

This outcome resonates with the findings in some studies. For instance, young adults were found to have a negative attitude about help-seeking when they perceive that previously their counselling experience was not helpful or if they felt that their concern was taken for granted (Rickwood et al., 2005; Wilson & Fogarty, 2002). Also, in the study conducted by Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen (2010), participants highlighted the role of previous negative experience in deterring from seeking help from professionals in the future. In the study, they pointed out that breach of confidentiality with regards to prior counselling experience could be the most difficult negative experience to debar future help-seeking and engender a negative attitude towards help-seeking. Conversely, Kagan and Zychlinski (2017) have found out that prior counselling experience increases the probability of positive attitude and future help-seeking. They assert that having prior counselling experience dispels any form of uncertainty one might hold regarding counselling session and in turn provides knowledge about the entire process.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the pertinent beliefs and attitudes that should be addressed for counselling help-seeking to take place. Four null hypotheses were tested, and the summary of the analysis was presented as well. The study could not statistically demonstrate that there was a significant difference in the beliefs and attitudes of male students across different faculties. Nonetheless, this study was able to prove statistically the difference in beliefs and attitudes of male students based on religion, family type and previous counselling experience.

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