Predictors of Help-Seeking Intentions Among Filipino College Students

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Abstract: Students' mental health has been a pressing concern among universities given that a lot of mental illnesses first onset during college period. Unfortunately, seeking help for mental illness has been a problem among college students. Mental illnesses are real medical problems that need the attention of medical experts. Delaying treatment can cause symptoms to worsen and may result to grave consequences in one's life. Previous studies have identified several factors that are associated with students' poor help-seeking behavior. In an attempt to understand the underlying elements that influence Filipino college students' help-seeking intentions for mental illness, 797 freshmen students (46% of them are male and 53.6% are female) were recruited from different colleges in a private university in Manila. Data was gathered through an online survey. Binary logistic regression revealed that three out of several factors that were included in the study were able to predict students' intentions to seek or not to seek help. These were 'weak-not-sick stigma', belief that the 'use of drugs to relax' is helpful for a mentally ill and belief that mental illness is 'not inherited or genetic'. Implications and recommendations are discussed.

Key Words: help-seeking intention; mental health; stigma

1. INTRODUCTION

WHO (2001) predicted that by year 2020 Depression will be the By 2030, it will be on top of list in the global burden of disease (WHO, 2008). Depression is a common mental illness that is treatable and preventable. Depending on its severity, treatment may vary from a combination of basic psychosocial support, medications such as anti-depressants and evidence-based psychotherapeutic interventions namely, cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT) or problem-solving treatment (WHO, 2010). Untreated depression can lead to serious consequences, not to mention, suicide (WHO, 2010; Hung, Liu and Yang, 2017).

Seeking help for mental illness from professionals is a crucial step in recovery. Yet, despite the consequences of delaying treatment and the availability of resources, there are still many people who choose to put off or not to take any action to attend to their mental problems (Bifftu, Takele, Guracho & Yehualashet, 2018). Prevalence studies from various communities worldwide show large gaps between treatment and mental illnesses. Kohn, Saxena, Levav and Saraceno (2004) identified some of these gaps for mental illness such as schizophrenia and other non-affective psychosis (32.2%); depression (56.3%); dysthymia (56.0%); bipolar disorder (50.2%); panic disorder (55.9); GAD (57.5%); OCD (57.3%), and alcohol abuse and dependence, showing the biggest gap among all (78.1%). This gap can also be observed in tertiary academic institutions where in spite of free counseling services being offered, only few

percentages of students make use of them (Anderson, 2018). As it is a well-known fact that mental illnesses onset between ages 18 to 25 years or during college period (Kessler, et al., 2005), something has to be done in order to increase students' help-seeking behavior, hence, bridge the mental health gap.

Literature shows several factors associated with people's decisions to seek help for their mental health concerns. Gender differences have been found to be associated to help-seeking intentions in previous studies in favor of females (Yu, et. al, 2015; Amarasuriya, Jorm & Reavley, 2018). Judd, Komiti & Jackson (2008) suggested that this may have something to do with men's higher level of stoicism and personal stigma on mental disorders. Knowledge about mental illnesses is another factor that has been well-studied in the field of mental health and has been found to be associated with people's decision to delay treatment (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010; Jorm, 2012). Evidences show that those with higher mental health literacy levels sought help more than those who have lower understanding of mental health (Yu, et. Al, 2015). Among all facets of mental health literacy, the recognition of mental disorder symptoms had been stressed to play a crucial role in people's help-seeking behavior (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen, 2010; Jorm, 2012; Amarasuriya, Jorm & Reavley, 2018).

Previous studies showed mixed findings in terms of the effects of stigma on help-seeking intention. In a two-year study conducted by Golberstein, Eisenberg and Gollust (2009), perceived stigma, or stigma that is based on what other people think, was found to be unrelated to help-seeking intentions. Similar results were reported by Schomerus, Matchinger & Angermeyer (2009), showing anticipatory discrimination on mental illness to be unrelated to help-seeking. Yap, Wright and Jorm (2011) described the three (3) personal stigma dimensions namely 'weak-not-sick', 'dangerous-unpredictable' and 'social distance' that predict help-seeking intentions among young adults. Prior exposure to mental health problems which includes people's experiences of mental health problems or knowledge of someone who

has it was also found to influence people's intentionality to seek help (Amarasuriya, Jorm & Reavley, 2018).

To date, very few studies described Filipino college students' help-seeking behavior (Tuliao, 2016; Firmante, 2017). As previous foreign researches have already identified several factors that may influence help-seeking intention, the current study attempts to answer the question: Do Filipino college students' gender, stigma on mental health problem, prior knowledge/ exposure to mental illness, and mental health literacy (i.e. understanding of causes, first aid, people who can help, treatment and preventive strategies influence their intentions to seek help for a mental health problem?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study (N=797) were Filipino male (46%) and female (53.6%) college freshmen students from different colleges of a private university in the Philippines. Their ages ranged from 15 to 21 years (M= 16.6 and SD= 0.78). They are taking up courses in Business (28.6%), Sciences and Technology (38.6%) and Humanities (32.7%).

2.2. Measures

The study adapted a portion of the Youth Boost Survey and General Community Survey which was originally designed to measure people's understandings of different mental disorders. The original surveys made use of case vignettes to assess people's understandings of mental illnesses and were utilized in a national survey on mental health and stigma in Australia (Reavley and Jorm, 2011). Both survey instruments have been used in different parts of the world to assess the mental health literacy of different populations (Loureiro, 2013; Reavley, Morgan & Jorm, 2014; Lam, 2014). Psychometric properties and validation procedures of the original

scales were established through the experts' consensus agreement on the helpfulness and harmfulness of items presented for the different disorders as criterion. Associations between scale scores relating to sociodemographic and prior exposure to mental illness were also utilized to increase the validity of the scales (Reavley, Morgan & Jorm, 2014). The instrument was modified to an online survey with minor revisions on very few items in order to suit the participants of the current study.

2.3. Procedures

Data was based on a larger 2015 study on Filipino College Students' Mental Health Literacy (Ines, 2019). Clearance to conduct the study was previously sought from the school administrators and a more recent authorization was obtained to conduct the current study. Participants consent to participate ere also ascertained. Data was gathered through an online survey wherein participants were asked to fill out some demographic information. A case vignette describing a person with symptoms of clinical depression was presented wherein they were asked to explain what was wrong with the person and what they think was the possible cause of the problem. Participants were asked a yes or no question on whether they will seek help if they experience the same problem as the person in the story. Participants were also asked to evaluate the helpfulness or harmfulness of particular first aid strategies, people who can respond, products, treatments and preventive strategies in relation to the problem presented in the vignette. As existing data is used in the current study, ethical clearance from the university was obtained as well as approved written permission from the department head that kept the data before conducting the research.

2.3.1. Preliminary Analysis
The study aimed to examine the influence of several independent variables namely: 1.) gender, 2.) proper recognition of the problem, 3.) stigma, 4.) prior knowledge on mental health or exposure to mental illness, 5.) beliefs about the cause of the mental health problem, 6.) beliefs about of first aid techniques, 7.) beliefs about people who can help, 8.) beliefs about treatment strategies and , 9.) beliefs about preventive strategies for mental health problems on the participants' intentions to seek help (1) or not to seek help (0) if they experience the same problem that presented in the hypothetical case. As there are only 2 variations for the outcome variable (yes or no), exploratory correlational analyses using Pearson Chi-Squared Test of Association or Chi-square Test (χ2) was conducted.

2.3.2. Binary Logistic Regression

Help-seeking intention (yes or no) was entered as dependent variable before conducting simultaneous binary logistic regressions for the dichotomized dummy values on perceived beliefs on 1.) causes of the problem (yes or no); 2. weak-not-sick stigma (likely, not likely), 3.) people who can help (helpful or harmful), 4.) first aid strategies (helpful or harmful), 5.) treatment strategies (helpful or harmful) 6.) helpfulness of preventive strategies (yes or no). Variables that reflected very low occurrence were not included in the analysis. Simultaneous regression model was used in order to allow the examination of the predictor variables while adjusting for all other variables in the model.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary results showed that out of 797 participants, only 66 participants will not seek help if they experienced the same problem as the character in the case vignette. Pearson Chi Square Test of Independence or Chi Square Test was used to see which independent variables are associated to the dependent variable. Results revealed 28 items that are significantly associated with help-seeking intention making them possible predictors variables. Binary Logistic Regression Analysis model was used to examine the identified predictor variables (IVs). Korkmaz, Güney, & Yiğiter (2012) explained that Logistic Regression Analysis is best used for the

purpose of categorization and appointment processes. Results showed that the responses for the IVs have been recoded automatically by the statistical program as 0 for all positive responses (helpful, likely and yes) and coded all negative responses as 1 (harmful, not likely and no) while the DV remains coded as yes (1) and no (0).

Results revealed that the full model containing all predictor variables was statistically significant $\chi2 =$ 73.040, df = (29, N= 797), p<.001. The results of the Cox & Snell, and Negelkerke estimates indicated that the new model explained between 8.8% to 20.1% of the variance that can be predicted from the variables. The

Hosmer Lemeshow test suggests that the model is a good fit to the data p= .753 (>.05). Based on the classification Block 1 table there was a very slight increase in the predictive ability of the new model. The new model can now correctly classify the outcome of 91.8% of the cases as compared to the 91.7% of the baseline model. Although the proposed model in the study was not very different from baseline model, data about specific predictors can provide us with insights about help-seeking intentions of college students. Table 1. shows predictor variables that made statistically significant contribution to the new model.

Table 1. Predictors of help-seeking intentions among college students

	B	SE	Wald	Df	Sig	Exp(B)	95% CI for Exp(B) Lower	Upper
weak-not-sick	.641	.302	4.486	1	.034	1.898	1.049	3.433
problem is not inherited or genetic	-.582	.295	3.892	1	.049	.559	.313	.996
using drugs to relax	-3.137	1.391	5.089	1	.024	.043	.003	.663

Results showed that 'weak-not-sick' belief (sig 0.042, Exp(B) 1.869) appeared to be the strongest predictor of helps-seeking intention. It displayed a positive beta value which indicates that those who attributed mental illness to a medical condition instead of a personal weakness have 1.869 times increased odds of intending to seek help. Rickwood & Thomas (2012) described that people have a tendency to seek help from informal sources such as family, friends and other non-professionals. This particular behavior had been observed to be more common among Asian and Asian-American cultures than in European Americans (Taylor, Welch, Kim & Sherman, 2007). Not seeking help from the right people can have detrimental effects because the symptoms of mental illness can worsen overtime and may cause can severe

consequences (Jorm, 2000; Hung, Liu and Yang, 2017; Angst, Stassen, Clayton & Angst, 2002).

Students' intention to not seek help increases by .559 times when the problem is seen as something that cannot be genetically passed on to an offspring (sig. 049, Exp(B) .559). Results showed that if a person thinks that using drugs to relax does not prevent mental health problem, intentionality to seek help also increases by .043 times (sig. 0.024, Exp(B) .043). The findings suggest that those who understand that mental health problems are more likely to seek help for their problem. However, their understanding of the biological nature of mental health may still be very vague as reflected in the patterns observed in the study which shows that people who do not know that mental illness can be inherited, as well as those who

do not believe that 'using drugs to relax' can prevent mental health problem, are more unlikely to seek help. Perhaps these could be some areas worthy of exploration as it seems that poor understanding of the biomedical nature of mental health problems affect people's intentions to seek or not to seek help.

4. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Filipino college students' intention to seek or not to seek help for a mental health problem can be influenced by their general understanding of mental illnesses. When one understands the very nature of mental illness as a medical problem rather than a weakness in character, they may be more likely to seek help. Those who believe that mental illness also can be inherited or genetic may also be more likely to seek help for mental health problems. Furthermore, the understanding of how helpful or not drugs are in the prevention of mental health problem also plays a role in students' decisions to seek or not to seek help. More quantitative and qualitative studies with larger population size from various groups should be done in order to further explore on people's notions of mental illness and how it affects their decisions to seek or not to seek help from a professional. Cultural factors can also be looked into in order to see if there are patterns unique to Filipinos.

Results of this study have implications how mental health awareness programs are conducted and how mental health programs and protocols are established in schools, workplaces and communities. The biological nature of mental illnesses should be emphasized in order to improve people's understanding of mental illnesses as medical conditions that need medical attention. Although it is recognized that support from family and friends contribute to the recovery of mentally ill individuals, awareness programs should likewise emphasize the crucial role that mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc. in the treatment and recovery of mentally ill individuals. Furthermore, results of this study can be used in designing effective intervention programs for mentally ill students which include counseling and psychotherapy and in educating carers of mentally ill individuals.

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