

PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD SEEKING PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL
HELP AMONG KUWAIT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was: (1) to investigate Kuwait University (KU) students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help; and (2) to investigate if family, friends, and societal support played a role in the student's decision to seek professional psychological help as measured by the Family, Friends, and Societal Support Scale (FFSS), which was developed by the author. Other assessment tools used in the study included: (1) Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) as developed by Fischer and Turner (1970); (2) Orientation Toward Utilization of Social Resources (OTUSR) as developed by Vaux, Burda, and Stewart (1986); (3) a modified Life Stress Events Scale (LSE) based on 18 items selected from the 43 items Social Readjustment Scale published by Holmes and Rahe (1967); and (4) Demographic Data Sheet (DDS). A total of 529 participants completed all five assessment tools. The results indicated that KU students have less favorable attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help than groups studied by other researchers. The results also supported previous research, which found females, in general, to have more favorable attitudes toward seeking professional help than males. Individuals who received previous counseling were more likely to have favorable attitudes toward seeking professional help than those who did not receive such help. Students who majored or minored in psychology had more favorable attitudes toward counseling than those who were not psychology majors or minors. The newly developed scale, FFSS, was an effective predictor of KU students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and explained more variance in ATSPPHS scores than any other predictors used in the study.

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Dedication

To my parents, grandparents, and parents-in-law.

To Fahad and my other brothers and sisters-in-law.

To my brother Mubarak and other members of the family.

To my wife and children, Mohammed, Shayma, and Asma. Nothing enough can fulfill my appreciation to all of you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Psychological services, including counseling, are relatively new in the Middle East, especially in Kuwait. It was not until 1958 that the first official psychiatric hospital, with only five psychiatrists, opened in Kuwait (Al-Motawa, Ayoub, & Horan, 1987). During that time, services at the psychiatric hospital included the dispensing of medication to patients with any degree of mental retardation or major personality disorders, such as schizophrenia. Fourteen years later, mental health and psychological services¹, which included counseling and psychotherapy, were started in this psychiatric hospital. In 1978, counselors were temporarily appointed to a few public schools in Kuwait. In 1983, the first counseling unit was founded to meet the psychological and academic needs of students enrolled at Kuwait University (KU) (Soliman, 1993). An estimated 200 mental health professionals are currently employed in Kuwait, one for every 3991 citizens (B. Alomar, B. Alshaibani, & K. Moursi, personal communication, November 20, 2000). Of these 200 professionals, only about 30 have a master's degree or higher level of education.

Despite the modest presence of professionals, mental health services have been underutilized in Kuwait (Soliman, 1993 & 1991; Abu Aita, 1988). For example, only 0.62% (n = 117) of the 19,000 KU students enrolled at Kuwait University sought counseling or psychological help from the University Counseling Unit in the academic year 2000-2001 (University Counseling Unit, 2001). Kuwait University, which was founded in 1966 as a co-educational institution, is located in Kuwait City. The university has grown from just over 400 students in 1966 to nearly 19,000 students (Admissions & Registration Office, 2001).

¹ For the purpose of this study, the terms counseling, psychotherapy, and psychological and mental health services are used interchangeably, with no difference in meaning.

The gap between available mental health service and service utilization rates is known as the “service gap” (Cramer, 1999; Stefl & Prospero, 1985). The service gap is often conceptualized as a problem of access. Additional barriers include, lack of information, cost of services, and negative attitudes toward seeking psychological help (Tata & Leong, 1994). Most Kuwaitis believe that counseling largely represents western ideology. According to Al-Thakeb (1985), the people of Kuwait appear to be less accepting of new ideologies that may clash with their values, beliefs, and customs. Any ideology that is inconsistent with Islamic and Kuwaiti traditions will often face some resistance. In spite of this resistance, significant changes are taking place in Kuwaiti society. For example, there are more private professional mental health practices than before, but these services are not well utilized by the public. Regardless of utilization, the need for counseling services to provide help for individuals is likely to increase.

To have a greater understanding of the attitudes among the people of Kuwait toward seeking psychological help, one must look at the role of Kuwaiti family, friends, and society on one’s decision-making skills. For instance, the Kuwaiti society is a family-oriented community that places great emphasis on the roles and functions of each of its members. The family (e.g., parents, siblings, and relatives) and community at-large (e.g., friends, neighbors, and peers) are more important sources of psychological, emotional, and financial support than counseling professionals. In addition to decisions regarding psychological help, the Kuwaiti family has enormous influence on one’s decisions regarding personal preferences such as marriage, career, political orientation, religious affiliation, and education. During times of crisis, it is anticipated that solutions would first be sought within the immediate family. Since the individual is considered “family property,” disclosing personal issues and family business outside the family setting is frowned upon and is contrary to Kuwaiti family values.

Because of the role and function one has within his or her family of origin, along with friends, society, cultural values, beliefs, and social stigma, it is not surprising that the people of Kuwait may be more reluctant to seek counseling services than those in western societies, where the counseling profession is better developed, understood, and accepted by most of its citizens. However, in some western societies the family and the social stigma associated with help-seeking behavior also influences decisions regarding counseling services. To further understand the resistance toward seeking psychological help among the people of Kuwait, the researcher explored the attitudes among students at KU using several different assessment tools. Special emphasis was placed on the role played by the influence of family, friends, and societal support.

Statement of the Problem

Professional psychological services are relatively new to Kuwait community, and underutilized. Although several factors have been identified as possible barriers of this underutilization, the attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help among the people of Kuwait remains unknown.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document and identify predictors of attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help among students at KU. Specifically, the study: (a) examined the attitudes toward seeking psychological services as measured by the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) (Fischer & Turner, 1970) among students at KU; (b) explored the role of family, friends, and societal support or sanction for seeking professional psychological help as measured by the Family, Friends, and Societal Support Scale (FFSS); and (c) investigated the extent to which KU students' attitudes can be predicted by other independent variables: (1) demographic variables (e.g., gender, previous counseling experience, psychology major); (2) the utilization of social-network support as

measured by the Orientation Toward Utilization of Support Resources Scale (OTUSRS) (Vaux, Burda, & Stewart, 1986); and (3) stressful life events as measured by an 18-item Life Stress Events (LSE) questionnaire constructed from the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).

Rationale

This study is motivated by the belief that the underutilization of psychological services in Kuwait appears to be attributed to the lack of support for seeking professional psychological help from family, friends, and society. In Kuwait, there is an expectation that individuals should turn to their family, friends, and social resources (e.g., relatives, neighbors) whenever help is needed. To seek help outside the family, including financial help, is often taken as an insult by many families and may stigmatize the family and the individual. Family and social influences against seeking psychological help are likely to be even stronger among the people of Kuwait because professional psychological services are far less accepted in the East than in the West. If the people of Kuwait are to reap the benefits that professional psychological services (e.g., counseling) have to offer, we must begin by understanding their attitudes and reluctance to seek psychological services.

The outcomes of this study will increase awareness among mental health professionals and the general public. It will also identify factors that may inhibit one's decision toward seeking professional psychological assistance. Another significant aspect of this research study lies in adding theoretical contributions to the body of multicultural counseling literature. This research will enrich the literature on counseling applications in Kuwait and the Middle East since there have been no previous research studies that covered this topic.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. KU students tend to have negative attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help as measured by the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) (Fischer & Turner, 1970);
2. KU students who have greater family, friends, and societal support for seeking professional psychological help as measured by FFSS are more likely to have positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help;
3. KU students who have high scores on ATSPPHS are more likely to have high scores on Life Stress Events scale (LSE);
4. KU students who have high scores on the Orientation Toward the Utilization of Social Resources scale (OTUSRS) are more likely to have low scores on ATSPPHS;
5. KU students who have high scores on OTUSRS are more likely to have low scores on LSE;
6. KU students who have received previous professional psychological help were more likely to have positive attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help than those who have not had previous professional psychological help;
7. Female students at KU would have higher mean scores than males on the ATSPPHS;
8. Female students at KU would have higher mean scores than males on the four subscales of the ATSPPHS; and
9. KU students who major or minor in psychology would have higher mean scores on the ATSPPHS than those who did not major or minor in psychology.

Ancillary Hypotheses

There would be statistical differences on the scores of the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPHS), Family, Friends, and Societal Supports to seeking professional psychological help (FFSS), Orientation Toward Utilization of Social Resources (OTUSRS), and Life Stress Events (LSE) on the following demographic variables:

- A. Marital status of participants (single vs. married).
- B. Geographical residence location of participants (urban vs. suburban).
- C. Participants' housing types (governmental vs. private).
- D. Employment status of participants' parents (employed vs. unemployed).
- E. Educational levels of participants' parents.
- F. Participants' immediate family income.
- G. Participants' immediate family size.

Research Questions

A major interest in this study was to document and predict KU students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and more importantly, examine the role of family, friends, and societal support associated with this kind of help-seeking behavior. Of interest also, were the factors that may serve as obstacles to those who may wish to avail themselves of this type of service, including:

1. Do KU students have positive or negative attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help?
2. Do KU students' attitudes differ from those found in similar studies?
3. Is there a relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and other demographic variables (gender, age, SES, education, marital status, location of residency or geographical location)?

4. Do scores from the family, friends, and societal support scale (FFSS) enhance prediction of the subscales and total scores on the ATSPPHS beyond that already obtained in previous studies using the other predictors?
5. Is there a relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and family, friends, and societal support?
6. Is there a relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and life stress events?
7. Is there a relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and utilization of society resources?
8. Are there any differences between male students and female students in perceived stigma associated with seeking professional psychological help?

Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following operational definitions are offered:

Counseling. The process in which a trained professional helps a person function more effectively and improve his or her life by addressing problems in a preventive, developmental, or remedial way.

Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. The attitudes that KU students have toward seeking professional psychological help as measured by a modified form of the ATSPPHS by (Fischer & Turner, 1970).

Family-Societal Support or Sanction. The family-societal support or sanction associated with the intention or behavior of seeking psychological help from professionals that KU students receive from their families, relatives, friends, and other social resources as measured by the FFSS developed for this study.

Orientation Toward Utilization of Support Resources. The orientation toward the utilization of social support that KU students have toward their families, relatives, friends, and other social resources as measured by a translated form of the OTUSRS (Vaux et al., 1986).

Life Stress. A life stress and/or state of tension with the expectation of negative stress experience as measured by a modified form of the SRRS (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).

Emic. Constructs that are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied (Lett, 1990, p. 130).

Etic. Constructs that are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers (Lett, 1990, p. 130).

Limitations of the Study

Some important limitations of this study should be reported.

1. The study relied primarily on self-report instruments to measure key constructs (e.g., attitudes, family, and societal support). Therefore, the honesty of the participants is presumed but not ascertain. Also, the actual experiences of the participants were not observed by the researcher to determine their validity. Furthermore, family and societal support and life stress events should be viewed as situational factors (e.g., social support as a buffer to certain behavior, seeking professional help) that the study did not assess here.
2. The correlational research design used in this study does not support cause-affect inferences about the relationships between family, friends, and societal support, life stress, and attitudes toward seeking psychological help.

3. The study involved a convenience sample and therefore individuals who did not participate in the study may have different attitudes toward counseling than those who participated.
4. The translation of the instruments used in the study from English to Arabic could affect the meaning of some items that may be better understood in English than in Arabic (e.g., counseling).
5. The lack of assessment tools regarding professional psychological services, since no single study can be found that surveyed professional psychological services in Kuwait.
6. Similar findings might have different explanations in different settings, which limit the generalizability of the study.

Summary

The KU students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help are unknown. The researcher hypothesized that KU students' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help could be explained largely by the support they receive from family, friends, and society. Other predictive factors included demographic variables (e.g., gender, previous counseling experience), orientation toward utilization of social resources, and life stress events. Because of the lack of information regarding attitudes toward seeking psychological services among KU students, the researcher explored this issue with hopes of not only gaining insight, but also of developing strategies that might be helpful in encouraging this population to seek counseling when services are warranted.