

Evaluation of Formal Help-Seeking: Prevalence of Discriminatory Behavior

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Abstract

Intro. Normative stressors such as academic demands, and nonnormative stressors such as family trouble have been estimated to affect one in five students during adolescence.¹ Students who hold minority identities (Black and/or LGB students) often report experiences of harassment², however are unlikely to engage in help-seeking behaviors.³ There is little research that examines correlations of help-seeking and discriminatory behavior. The current study examines whether a relationship exists between students' sex, age, witnessing discrimination and their likelihood of engaging in help-seeking behaviors. **Methods.** High school students were given a paper survey asking about their bystander behaviors and the behaviors of others. **Results.** The current study found that students with a higher average age, female students and students who witness discrimination reported greater likelihood of having a problem, but not greater willingness to see a counselor. Help-seeking measures were defined in two separate ways, supporting different findings. **Discussion.** Limitations of the current study as well as further research implications are discussed.

Introduction

- Lack of help-seeking among high school aged students is a widespread problem.¹
- Individuals have reported resisting help-seeking⁴ – due to peer disapproval and negative beliefs about professionals.⁵
- Males were less likely to engage in help-seeking due to the negative stigma associated with male emotionality.⁶
- The trend of seeking informal help rather than formal/professional help is more pronounced in younger teenagers.⁷
- Racial minority⁸ – and LGB individuals were more likely to seek help from friends and family rather than from professionals.⁹

Predictions

1. Female students will be more likely to report help-seeking.
2. The average age of students who will be more likely to report help-seeking behaviors will be higher.
3. Students who witness racial and sexual orientation prejudice will be less likely to report seeking professional help.

Method

Participants

- 984 students responded from a public high school in a small-to-medium sized town in New England
- Age of sample: Mean = 16 years (SD = 1.25), Range = 13-19 years
- Sex of sample: 510 females (51.8%) 466 males (47.4%)

Data Analysis

- Chi-square analyses were performed to determine if there is a relationship between witnessing discrimination, sex, and help-seeking behavior.
- T-test analyses were performed to determine if there is a relationship between age and help-seeking behavior.

Method (cont.)

Measures

- **Help-seeking behavior:** "If you have problems and need someone to help you, do you see a counselor to help with your problems?"
- Responses are re-coded in two ways. First, an indicator of whether they (1) have a problem to talk about with a counselor, or (0) have no problem. Second, an indicator of whether they (1) see a counselor, or (0) do not see a counselor.
- **Have a problem:** "A problem you need counseling help with."
- **See a counselor:** "See a counselor at school, see a counselor outside of school, or see a counselor at school and outside of school."
- **Witnessing discrimination:** "During the past 12 months how often have you heard other students make derogatory or insulting comments about someone's religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation at school?"
- Responses are re-coded into a dichotomous indicator of whether they (1) had witnessed discrimination at least once in the past year, or (0) had not witnessed any discrimination in the past year.

Procedure

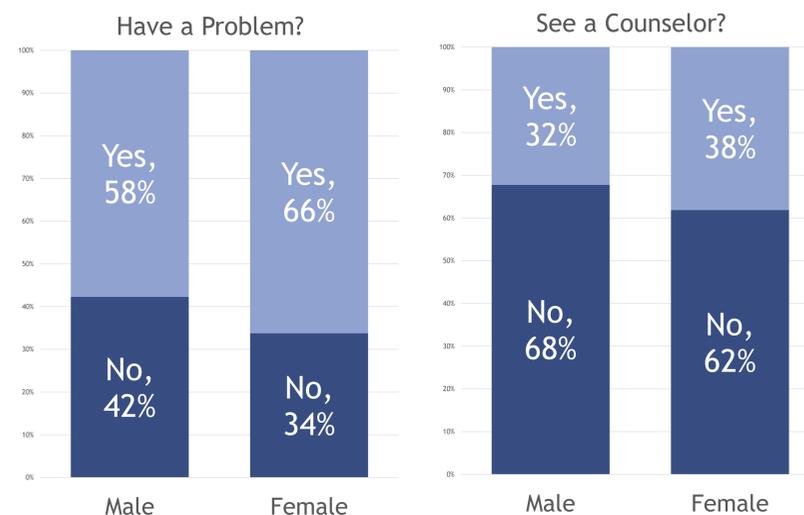
- Participants from every grade were given a paper survey asking about their bystander behaviors and the perceived behaviors of others; this data was collected as part of a larger project in collaboration with the school.
- Participants were incentivized with a fruit snack.

Results

The findings of female students reporting having more problems but not greater willingness to see a counselor only somewhat supported our prediction. Our second hypothesis was not supported by the findings that there was no difference in age for likelihood of seeing a counselor. The findings of students who witness discrimination reporting less willingness to seek professional help only somewhat supported our hypothesis.

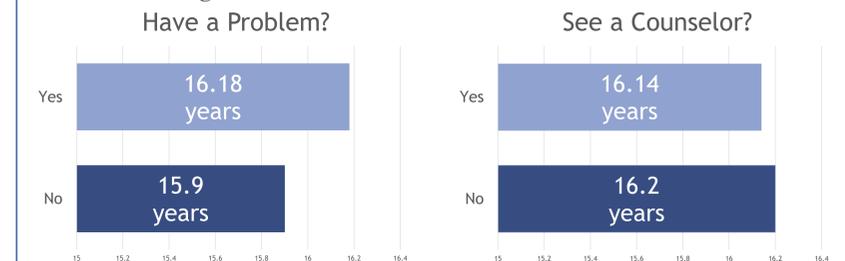
1. Openness to Help-Seeking Behaviors By Sex

- Female students reported having problems more than male students, $X^2(1, 897) = 6.90, p < .01$, but not greater likelihood of seeing a counselor, $X^2(1, 559) = 2.08, n.s.$ This only somewhat supported H1, specifically that females are more likely to acknowledge having a problem but were not more likely to utilize formal support.



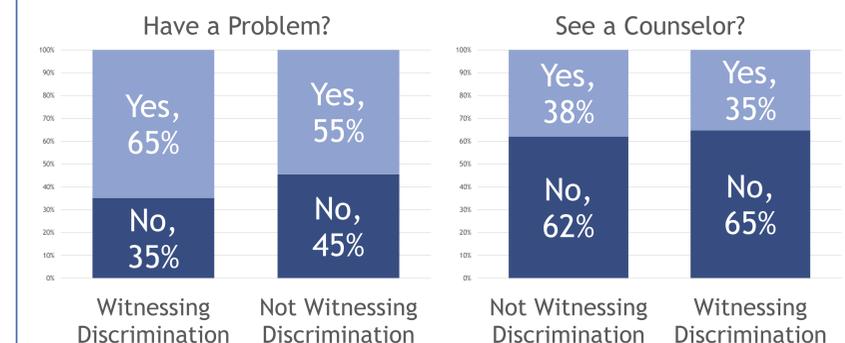
2. Help-Seeking Behaviors By Age

- T-test analyses were performed to compare the mean ages of participants who had problems or didn't, $t(898) = t-3.27, p < .01$, and also the mean ages of participants who saw a counselor or didn't, $t(560) = .603, n.s.$ This only somewhat supported H2, specifically that students who reported having a problem were older than students who did not report having a problem, but students who reported seeing a counselor were no different in age from those who did not see a counselor.



3. Help-Seeking Based on Witnessing Discrimination

- Students who witnessed racial and sexual orientation discrimination reported having more problems than students who did not witness discrimination, $X^2(1, 884) = 6.99, p < .01$, but not greater likelihood of seeing a counselor, $X^2(1, N = 553) = .27, n.s.$ This only somewhat supported H3, specifically that students who witnessed discrimination were more likely to have a problem but were not more likely to utilize formal support.



Discussion and Limitations

- High school youth may have problems they feel they need counseling for, yet are not seeking counseling. Policies should be improved to encourage youth to utilize counseling services.
- Future research should be conducted to explore how student perceptions of help-seeking may affect willingness to receive counseling.
- There are a lack of previously validated scales within this field of research. To improve these measures, help-seeking should be considered in relation to normative/nonnormative stressors in youth.

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