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Help-seeking attitudes of university students: the role of personality traits and demographic factors

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The current study examined the influences of personality traits, gender, previous counseling or therapy experiences, and knowledge about the psychological services provided on campus on the help-seeking attitudes of Turkish undergraduate students and their initial preferences for help sources. The students ($N = 524$) completed measures of attitudes toward help-seeking, personality traits, and demographic factors. Hierarchical linear regression indicated that the females, those who had knowledge about the psychological services provided on campus, and those who were extraverted, agreeable, and open had more positive help-seeking attitudes. Most of the students initially preferred sharing their problems/concerns with their peers. The findings are discussed in light of the relevant literature and were used to draw some implications for university counseling centres.

Keywords: demographic factors; help-seeking attitudes; personality traits; Turkish university students

When in university, students experience various life events and often require professional psychological help to deal with the many challenges. The attitude toward seeking help is a prominent factor affecting an individual's decision to accept professional psychological assistance. This attitude is influenced by personal, social, demographic, and other such factors. Some associated personal factors are attachment styles (Moran, 2007; Vogel & Wei, 2005), emotional openness (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000), psychological distress (Chang, 2007), depression (Halgin, Weaver, Edell, & Spencer, 1987), and opinions about mental illness (Leong & Zachar, 1999). The social factors that have been found to impact this attitude are acculturation (Ramos-Sanchez & Atkinson, 2009), cultural congruity, perceived social support (Miville & Constantine, 2006), gender roles (Türküm, 2005), and gender role conflict (Wisch, Mahalik, Hayes, & Nutt, 1995). Some demographic variables that have been studied in relation to help-seeking attitudes are gender, age (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Knox, 2006), ethnic group (Sherer, 2007), race, and socioeconomic status (Martin, 2002).

This study aimed to investigate the predictive ability of some personality traits, gender, previous counseling or therapy experience, and preferences for help sources on help-seeking attitudes of college students. In this regard, the literature review is organized into several sections. Initially, studies indicating the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and personality traits are summarized. Secondly, the role of gender in help-seeking is discussed. Finally, the literature relating to the association between help-seeking and previous counseling or therapy experience, and students' preferences for help sources are presented.

Help-seeking and personality

The Big Five Model (BFM) is commonly used to evaluate the structural pattern of personality (John, Naumann & Soto, 2008). The BFM posits that the patterns of correlated variation among personality traits are described by five basic dimensions, labeled as Extraversion (or Surgency vs. Introversion), Agreeableness (vs. Antagonism), Conscientiousness (or Will to Achieve vs. Undependability), Neuroticism (vs. Emotional Stability), and Openness (or Intellect) (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Extraversion refers to talkative, passionate, lively, dominant, and sociable characteristics. Agreeableness, sometimes called social adaptability, indicates a good-natured, soft-hearted, and friendly personality. Conscientious people tend to be focused on achievement, hard work, ambition, and responsibility. Neuroticism refers to emotional stability and is related to worrisome, anxious, and vulnerable traits. The last trait, Openness, refers to creative and imaginative traits (Cloninger, 2004). In the rele-

vant literature, there is debate about whether these personality traits are shaped by culture, or if they are universal (see Church, 2010). Since these traits are not visible in some cultures, it has been interpreted that personality structure changes across cultures (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). However, there is some evidence for the applicability of the BFM to other cultures than the one in which it was developed (e.g. Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martinez, 2007). Individualism and collectivism are considered as significant aspects of cultural differences (Kagitcibasi, 1997). Western cultures, where the BFM was developed, are mostly characterized as individualistic, whereas "Turkish people still seem to be close to the collectivist end while at the same time striving for individualism" (Aydin, 2000, p. 282). In fact, people living in metropolises or urban areas in Turkey mostly display similar individualistic characteristics to western cultures. On the other hand, the lifestyle in the rural parts of cities in Turkey still shows evidence of collectivist values. The replicability of the BFM in Turkey was initially tested by Somer and Goldberg (1999). Although Turkey has some cultural differences — for example, collectivist values, child-rearing practices, and language — they found that the BFM was replicable on Turkish samples.

Personality is one of the personal factors associated with help-seeking attitudes. Studies have investigated the links between attitudes toward professional help-seeking and the personality variables of self-esteem, anxiety, and locus of control in university students and the general population (Barwick, de Man, & McKelvie, 2009), and collective self-esteem in Taiwanese high school and college students (Yeh, 2002). In addition to these variables, the role of personality domains, as a dispositional trait, in predicting help-seeking attitudes has been explored in a few available studies (Puma, 1996; Tsan & Day, 2007). In a study conducted with 176 college students in the United States, Tsan and Day (2007) found that extraverts hold more positive attitudes toward professional help-seeking. Puma (1996) found no significant relationship between the Big Five personality traits and help-seeking attitudes in 263 undergraduate students from the United States. Although a few available studies have suggested a relationship between personality traits and help-seeking attitudes, the findings are inadequate to explain this relationship, which needs further investigation. In this study, it was expected that personality traits would predict the help-seeking attitudes of students.

Role of gender in help-seeking

The other factor influencing help-seeking attitudes, mentioned earlier as a demographic factor, is gender. Gender has consistently been found to be related with help-seeking attitudes, indicating that females hold more favorable attitudes toward professional help-seeking than males do (Barwick, de Man, & McKelvie, 2009; Kalkan & Odaci, 2005; Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Knox, 2006; Moran, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Atkinson, 2009; Shea & Yeh, 2008). Kakhnovets (2011) examined the association between gender and help-seeking attitudes among 411 undergraduate students and found their results supporting previous findings. These results have been widely explained in terms of gender role and gender role conflicts. In this study, it was expected that female students would have more positive attitudes toward help-seeking than male students would, as is suggested by the research findings.

Help-seeking and counseling or therapy experiences

Previous counseling or therapy experiences and knowledge about psychological services have been investigated as factors in relation to help-seeking attitudes, mostly yielding a positive association. Previous help-seeking experiences appear to increase the tendency to seek help in adolescent and college groups (McGrath, 1995; Moran, 2007). Kakhnovets (2011) found that undergraduate students who had previous counseling experience reported more positive help-seeking attitudes. It is possible that seeing a counselor in the past may provide an awareness related to the counseling process. In addition, the results of Kakhnovets' (2011) study indicated that individuals who had good counseling experiences in the past hold more positive help-seeking attitudes. Studies conducted with Turkish college students have found that positive help-seeking attitudes are correlated with previous coun-

seling or therapy experiences (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Türküm, 2005). In this study, it was expected that the students who had counseling or therapy experiences would have more positive attitudes toward help-seeking than those who did not, as suggested by the literature mentioned above.

Awareness of existing professional psychological services on campus is also considered a significant factor affecting the utilization of counseling or health centres. Individuals with information about the accessibility, availability, and functionality of these centres are more likely to utilize them (Andersen, 1995; Demir & Aydın, 1996). Therefore, in this study, it was expected that students who had knowledge about the professional psychological services provided on campus would have more positive attitudes toward help-seeking.

Students' preferences for help sources

Help sources could be another important factor related to attitudes toward help-seeking. McGrath (1995) reported that most college students ($N = 113$) preferred sharing their non-academic concerns with close friends rather than counseling professionals. Similarly, other studies found that students mostly preferred to discuss their psychological problems with their friends (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh, 1999). In this study, the aim was to explore the students' initial preferences for help sources. Taken together, the purpose of the current investigation was to determine the role of personality traits, gender, previous counseling or therapy experiences, and knowledge about the psychological services provided on campus in predicting the help-seeking attitudes of undergraduate students.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 524 students (399 females, 125 males) who were enrolled in five undergraduate programs of the Faculty of Educational Sciences at Ankara University, Turkey. A convenient sampling procedure was applied when recruiting the participants. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 35 years ($M = 20.07$; $SD = 2.06$). Their demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Measures

Demographic variables. All the participants were asked to fill out a brief demographic information form that included questions related to gender, age, grade level, registered programs, whether they have received or are receiving any professional psychological help, whether they had any knowledge about the professional psychological services provided on campus, and with whom they initially preferred to share their psychological problems/concerns (e.g. peers, parents, professionals offering psychological help, and faculty members).

Attitudes toward help-seeking. The participants' attitudes toward help-seeking were measured with the Scale of Attitudes toward Seeking Psychological Help-Shortened (SASPH-S) developed by Türküm (2001). This is an 18-item scale evaluating attributes toward psychological help-seeking. The participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). While 12 items on this scale are positive, 6 items are reversed. After recoding the reversed items, a total score is obtained. Higher scores indicate a positive attitude toward help-seeking. A Cronbach alpha coefficient of .90 was found for the SASPH-S. The test-retest reliability for the whole scale with a 10-week interval was .77 (Türküm, 2001). In the current investigation, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .89.

Personality traits. The participants' personality traits were assessed with the Big Five Inventory (BFI) developed by John, Donahue, and Kentle (1991). This is a 44-item scale, and the participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The BFI con-

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Variable	Level	Female		Male		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		399	76.1	125	23.9	524	100.0
Program	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	199	38.0	44	8.4	243	46.4
	Teacher Training for the Mentally Challenged	59	11.2	36	6.9	95	18.1
	Elementary Teacher Training	26	5.0	6	1.1	32	6.1
	Teacher Training for the Culture of Religion and Ethics	59	11.2	34	6.5	93	17.7
	Preschool Teacher Training	56	10.7	5	1.0	61	11.5
Grade level	Freshmen	179	34.2	52	9.9	231	44.1
	Sophomores	54	10.2	17	3.3	71	13.5
	Juniors	68	13.0	22	4.2	90	17.2
	Seniors	98	18.7	34	6.5	132	25.2
Received psychological help in the past	Yes	42	8.1	6	1.1	48	9.2
	No	356	68.0	119	22.8	475	90.8
Knowledge about the psychological services on campus	Yes	54	10.3	14	2.7	68	13.0
	No	344	65.8	111	21.2	455	87.0
Preferences for help sources	Peers	220	43.3	84	16.6	304	59.9
	Parents	82	16.1	13	2.6	95	18.7
	Siblings	62	12.1	15	3.1	77	15.2
	Professionals offering psychological help	6	1.1	2	.5	8	1.6
	Relatives	5	1.0	2	.4	7	1.4
	Faculty members	0	.0	2	.4	2	.4
	Others	8	1.5	6	1.3	14	2.8

sists of five personality dimensions: Extraversion (8 items), Agreeableness (9 items), Conscientiousness (9 items), Neuroticism (8 items), and Openness (10 items). All the items included short phrases based on prototypical trait adjectives related to each of the Big Five dimensions. John and Srivastava (1999) reported alpha reliabilities ranging from .75 to .90 for subscales and 3-month test-retest reliabilities ranging from .80 to .90. The BFI was adapted into Turkish by Sümer (unpublished data) in an international project (as cited in Sümer, Lajunen, & Özkan, 2005). The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged between .64 and .77 (Sümer, Lajunen, & Özkan, 2005). In the present study, Cronbach alpha coefficients for the subscales were as follows: .75 for Extraversion, .58 for Agreeableness, .73 for Conscientiousness, .74 for Neuroticism, and .77 for Openness.

Procedure

Before administration of the scales, appointments were arranged with the class instructors at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara University. The purpose of the study was explained to them,

and their permission was sought to apply the instruments during their classes. After obtaining their approval, the researchers applied the instruments with the participants who had volunteered. Before starting administration, informed consent and permission to report the findings were obtained from the volunteer participants. During the administration, the participants were also informed about the purpose and completion of the study and assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The administration took approximately 25 min.

Analysis of data

Initially, data screening procedures were performed and the underlying assumptions (outlier tests, normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity) for multiple regression analysis were checked. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed for the criterion variable and predictors. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess how well personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness), gender, previous counseling or therapy experiences, and knowledge about the psychological services predicted the help-seeking attitudes of students. Gender, previous counseling or therapy experiences, and knowledge about the psychological services were evaluated as dichotomous variables. The hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed in three steps. The variable in the first step was gender. In the second step, the variables of “previous counseling or therapy experiences” and “knowledge about the professional psychological services provided on campus” were entered into the model. In the third step, in addition to the other predictors, personality traits were entered into the model. A frequency analysis was carried out to investigate with whom the students initially preferred to share their psychological problems/concerns. All statistical analyses were performed utilizing SPSS 18.0.

RESULTS

Results of regression in predicting students' help-seeking attitudes

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed with help-seeking attitudes as the criterion variable and gender, previous counseling or therapy experiences, knowledge about the psychological services, and personality traits as predictors. The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are summarized in Table 2.

A three-step model was adopted. The full model accounted for 22% of the total variance of psychological help-seeking attitudes, $F(8, 513) = 18.44, p < .001$. The predictors added at each step yielded significant R^2 changes. Table 3 shows the regression results, which support the expectation that gender, knowledge about the psychological services, and personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness) contributed to the prediction of help-seeking attitudes. Being male and not having knowledge about the psychological services were negatively associated with help-seeking attitudes, whereas personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness) were found to be positively associated. Squared semi-partial correlations indicated that the major part of the variance in help-seeking attitudes was explained by gender.

Preferences for help sources

When the students were asked “with whom they initially preferred to share their psychological problems/concerns”, it was reported that they mostly preferred to do so with their peers. Their second preference was their parents. Interestingly, professionals offering psychological help were only fourth in preference, followed by relatives and then faculty members. The rates are presented in Table 1.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the role of personality traits and demographic variables in predicting the help-seeking attitudes of university students and to identify their initial preferences for help sources. The regression analysis with three hierarchical steps showed that personality traits

Table 2. Means and Inter-Correlations for Help-Seeking Attitudes and Predictors

Variables	M	Bivariate Correlations for Predictor Variables											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9			
Criterion Variable													
1. Help-seeking	72.42												
Predictors													
2. Gender	-	-.34**											
3. Received professional help	-	-.12**	.09										
4. Knowledge	-	-.19**	.03	.15**									
5. BFI - Extraversion	26.52	.21**	-.03	-.07	-.12**								
6. BFI - Agreeableness	34.30	.23**	-.13**	.00	.00	.16**							
7. BFI - Conscientiousness	32.16	.17**	-.14**	-.02	-.00	.13**	.40**						
8. BFI - Neuroticism	23.00	-.09*	-.05	-.12**	-.03	-.12**	-.31**	-.27**					
9. BFI - Openness	35.32	.20**	.03	-.10*	-.01	.42**	.26**	.25**	-.17**				

Note: N = 524; * p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 3. Hierarchical Linear Regression: Predicting Students' Help-Seeking Attitudes

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE b</i>	β	<i>sr</i> ²
Step 1				
Constant	83.11	1.37		
Gender (male)	-8.62	1.04	-.34***	.12
Step 2				
Constant	97.31	3.68		
Gender (male)	-8.36	1.03	-.33***	.11
Receiving professional help (No)	-2.28	1.53	-.06	.00
Knowledge (No)	-5.44	1.31	-.17***	.03
Step 3				
Constant	73.88	6.59		
Gender (male)	-7.99	1.01	-.32***	.09
Receiving professional help (No)	-1.848	1.50	-.05	.00
Knowledge (No)	-5.13	1.27	.16***	.02
BFI - Extraversion	.19	.08	.10*	.01
BFI - Agreeableness	.27	.11	.12*	.01
BFI - Conscientiousness	.05	.08	.03	.00
BFI - Neuroticism	-.07	.08	-.04	.00
BFI - Openness	.20	.08	.12**	.01

Note: $R^2 = .12$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .03$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .07$ for Step 3 ($p < .001$)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

(Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness) and demographic variables (gender and knowledge about the professional psychological services provided on campus) were significant predictors of help-seeking attitudes. As expected, the results indicated that the students who portrayed themselves as extraverted, agreeable, and open were more likely to have positive help-seeking attitudes. However, neither Conscientiousness nor Neuroticism significantly contributed to the prediction of help-seeking attitudes. This finding supported the notion that personality factors play a significant role in the decision to accept or seek professional assistance (Fischer & Turner, 1970) and replicated some previous studies, which have indicated that the attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help are associated with Extraversion (Kakhnovets, 2011; Tsan & Day, 2007) and Openness (Kakhnovets, 2011) but not with Conscientiousness (Puma, 1996) and Neuroticism (Puma, 1996; Tsan & Day, 2007). Extraverts tend to be enthusiastic, talkative, and socially assertive. They are energized when other people are around them, and when they have problems they may need someone to talk to. Therefore, they are more likely to have positive attitudes toward help-seeking. Agreeable people are generally considerate, cooperative, friendly, helpful, and have an optimistic view. These descriptions may help explain why agreeable people have positive help-seeking attitudes. Open people are prone to try new things in their life; they are open to new experiences like counseling by a professional for their problems or concerns. Kakhnovets (2011) stated that since closed people are more conservative and conventional, they may not be eager to seek help. Neither Conscientiousness nor Neuroticism was a significant predictor of help-seeking attitudes. This may be because these variables were assigned at the last entry of the regression analysis. As shown in the correlation table, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism were significantly correlated with help-seeking attitudes. However, being entered into the model at the last entry may have decreased the predictive ability of these variables (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Being female was found to be related with positive help-seeking attitudes. As predicted, this was consistent with previous research findings, which have indicated that females hold a more positive attitude toward help-seeking than males do (Bayer & Peay, 1997; Chang, 2007; Kilinc & Granello,

2003; Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Knox, 2006; Masuda, Suzumura, Beauchamp, Howells, & Clay, 2005; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004; Türküm, 2005). One possible explanation for this finding could be related to gender role socialization: as compared to androgynous or feminine individuals, masculine individuals have less positive attitudes toward help-seeking (Türküm, 2005). In addition, the less favourable attitudes of males regarding help-seeking might be associated with their perception of stigma and being less emotionally open (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000) or less psychologically open (Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Knox, 2006). These factors could also be considered as components of gender role socialization. In the regression model, gender was found to be the most predictive of help-seeking attitudes among the predictors. This supported the notion that gender is a universal predictor of help-seeking attitudes (Masuda *et al.*, 2005).

In contrast to previous investigations (Chang, 2008; Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Masuda *et al.*, 2005), the current study demonstrated that previous counseling or therapy experiences did not contribute to the help-seeking attitudes of students. It was expected that the students with past counseling or therapy experiences would hold more positive help-seeking attitudes than those who had never received counseling or therapy. This finding might be explained by the quality of previous counseling or therapy experiences. In this study, we did not have any information about the quality of these experiences, but Pugh (2000) showed that those who had experienced positive counseling or therapy reported more positive professional help-seeking attitudes than those who had never received counseling or therapy or who had negative experiences. Another consideration when interpreting this finding was that only 9% of the students reported that they had counseling or therapy experiences, which might not provide enough predictive ability for this variable.

In examining the role of knowledge about the psychological services provided by professionals on campus, it was found that, as expected, students who had knowledge about these services held more favorable attitudes toward help-seeking. This finding was consistent with the behavioral model of health-care utilization, which proposes that enabling resources such as availability, accessibility, and cost of services influences people's utilization of health services (Andersen, 1995). Similarly, lack of information about counseling services plays an important role in the underutilization of these services (Demir & Aydın, 1996; Erkin, 1994). Moreover, students might be inclined to misinterpret the role of these services because of inadequate knowledge. Demir and Aydın (1996) discussed that most students are not willing to obtain psychological assistance from counseling centres for fear of being stigmatized or labeled. Taken together, it was apparent that having accurate and adequate knowledge about psychological services generated a more positive perception toward help-seeking.

When the students were asked with whom they initially preferred to share their psychological problems/concerns, the highest reported help source was their peers, which was consistent with previous studies (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Knox, 2006). The help sources that were less preferred by the students were faculty members and professionals offering psychological help. Similar to the findings of this study, Kilinc and Granello (2003) found that friends were the most preferred help sources, whereas professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors) and academic advisers were less preferred sources. A possible explanation for this finding could be that peers and families are in the immediate context (physically, socially, and psychologically) of the individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Since this context is easily reachable, more supportive, and more intimate, the individuals might initially prefer peers and families. Individualism and collectivism could also be another significant factor in explaining this finding. Turkey is mostly characterized by collectivist values that place more importance on the cultural values of commitment to group and family (Kagitcibasi, 1996). Since many individuals in collectivist cultures are inclined to be more group-oriented (Triandis, 1999), the participants in this study could prefer to share their concerns with their friends and families.

In conclusion, consistent with the predicted outcomes of the study, female students, students who had knowledge about the professional psychological services on campus, and those who described themselves as extraverted, agreeable, and open held more favorable attitudes toward help-

seeking from professionals. However, contrary to the previous findings, the participants' previous counseling or therapy experiences did not significantly contribute to their help-seeking attitudes. The students initially preferred sharing their problems/concerns with their peers.

The findings of the current investigation could assist in enhancing the effectiveness of counseling centres in universities. For instance, the findings suggested that personality traits and gender are factors that influence students' tendencies to seek or resist professional psychological assistance. Given that the students who had information about the available professional psychological services held more favourable attitudes toward help-seeking, centres should make efforts to increase students' understanding of the functions of and rationale behind these centres by utilizing informative brochures, Web pages, or orientation programs. Unfortunately, when the participants' demographic characteristics were investigated, only 13% of them reported being aware of the help services available on campus. To address this, peer sources, as supported by the findings of this study, could be used to reach those people and provide them with psychological assistance. For instance, the centres could provide peer counseling programs.

Although this study has contributed to the literature on help-seeking attitudes from a different cultural context, it has some limitations. First, as all the participants were from the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara University, the generalizability of the findings to other populations may be limited. Second, although the reliability values of the Big Five Inventory subscales were at acceptable levels, they were relatively low. Therefore, the findings concerning personality traits are limited to data obtained from this instrument. Finally, since this study had a correlational design, it might not be appropriate to make causal inferences from the findings.

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