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RESEARCH ARTICLE

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING AND
GUIDANCE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Students are the major recipients of psychological guidance and counselling services in a university setting where each student is able to derive optimal educational benefits so as to actualize his/her potentialities. Students face great challenges and difficulties ranging from individual personal problems, to institutional and general problems when they enter a university for the first time. Purpose of this study was to determine knowledge and attitudes of a selected group of undergraduates towards psychological guidance and counselling.

Methodology: This was a descriptive cross sectional study, conducted in first year undergraduates of the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, KDU. A pilot study was carried out with 05 first year undergraduates of the B.Sc. Nursing Programme at University of Sri Jayewardenepura, to test the study instrument. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, KDU. Pre tested, self – reported questionnaire focused on attitudes and knowledge on guidance and counselling was administered to 177 first year undergraduates of FAHS, KDU after obtaining informed consent from the participants. Data analysis was done using SPSS software.

Results: The study population included 109 (61.6%) females and 68(38.4%) males. High proportion of students (75.7%) reported awareness of guidance and counselling services provided by the university. Students' knowledge level towards psychological guidance and psychological counselling were at a higher level. Considering attitudes towards guidance and psychological counselling, more than half the population showed negative attitudes towards the three domains of attitudes; that is, psychological openness, indifference to stigma and help seeking behaviour.

Conclusion: Majority of undergraduates had a good knowledge on guidance and counselling. However attitudes towards psychological openness, indifference to stigma and help seeking behaviour were negative. It is recommended to conduct workshops or awareness programmes to enhance students' knowledge and positive attitudes towards guidance and counselling services especially during their orientation period and promote future research to provide effective psychological guidance and counselling services for undergraduates of KDU.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of guidance and psychological counselling services is to enable each student in the university to derive optimal educational benefits so as to achieve his/her potentialities. The UNESCO module on guidance and counselling (2000a) has stated that guidance and counselling is a professional field which contains a broad range of activities, programmes and services to assist individuals to understand themselves, their problems, their school environment and to make wise decisions. Idea to conduct a study on the knowledge and attitude towards psychological guidance and psychological counselling of university undergraduates' driven from the assumption that students are the major recipients of guidance and counselling services in the university setting. "The way students respond and perceive guidance and counselling

services will determine the need of guidance and counselling services in universities" (Eyo, Joshua and Esuong, 2010). Anasasi (1990) defined attitude as "a tendency to react favourably or unfavourably towards a designed class of stimuli". Validya (1989) explains attitude as "a condition of readiness for a certain type of activity". According to Crow and Crow (1979), "a child's attitude towards his work affects his worth in his activity." Geshinde (2000) stated that educational goal can be achieved through the accomplishment of the aims and objectives of guidance and counselling. Psychological counselling helps the student to understand him or herself better. Counselling involves something more than providing a solution to an immediate problem. Counselling itself is supposed to maintain a personal stability of repeated challenges. A counselling unit includes educational, vocational, personal as well as social aspects. The students' problems in these areas can easily be solved if only the individual student can open up, ready to be helped and participate fully in solving the problem at hand.

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Adegoke (2004) states, "guidance means asserting, piloting helping an individual with all the services to bring out the best of him/herself towards maximizing the potentials". The guidance and counselling services would help in great measure to improve lot of students in the universities and help them to gain all aspects of health (physical, mental, socio cultural and spiritual) and to be fully functional. It is clear that during the orientation period, students who are newly admitted in universities need guidance and psychological counselling to familiarize with a new environment along with rules and regulations. The highlights of the National Policy on Education in Nigeria (1998) states "in view of the apparent ignorance of many young people about career prospects and in view of personality adjustments among school children, career officers and counsellors will be appointed in post-primary institutions and tertiary levels". Unfortunately in Sri Lanka the practice of these services at the institutions of learning (at the secondary school level and even at the university level) is poor.

Background and Justification

Education is very vital in the development of any nation, more importantly higher education. Unfortunately, the same higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties ranging from individual personal problem, to institutional and general problems. University students, who enter a university for the first time, are exposed to various challenges and psychological problems due to many reasons. Many of them are separated from family and loved ones, they may find it hard to adapt to university life. University sub culture is quite different from the school and home environment and students have to change their usual life style and adapt to a new life style. Apart from that accommodation, overcrowded hostels or boarding places, irritable roommates, food and other basic needs, economical problems, heavy academic work and language problems will also affect them with increase psychological stress and affect the mental health of the students. Students may adapt unhealthy ways to cope with these psychological problems if they do not have good support and guidance. Some tend to leave the courses during the orientation period due to lack of proper guidance and counselling service. Some students may get used to alcohol, smoking or drugs as a relief to their psychological problems. Even though student counselling services are available in each university, the appropriate use of these counselling services is questionable as most of the students are reluctant to seek counselling support. The reasons may be majority of the new students are unaware and have poor knowledge on psychological counselling and the benefits of such service provide to students. In Sri Lanka, unlike in western countries there is no proper system in guidance and counselling at the secondary school level. Further cultural matters, social stigma and negative attitudes towards counselling may prevent them discuss personal problems with a professional counsellor or a university lecturer. Most of the undergraduates have no clear idea on what counselling is and how they can get help to overcome their psychological problems with a professional help of a counsellor. Faculty of Allied Health Sciences at the KDU is newly established and this is a new experience for both lecturers and students. Therefore it is important to investigate knowledge and attitudes towards psychological counselling

among first year undergraduates in Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. Another importance of this study is to improve the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services at the university level.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Study Setting, Study Population, Study Design, Sample Size and Sampling technique This was a descriptive cross sectional study conducted among the first year undergraduates. The study was conducted in Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, KDU in June 2013. The study setting of this research was Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. The faculty conducts 05 degree courses including, BSc in Nursing Degree which has 100 students and BSc in Pharmacy, Radiology, Physiotherapy and Medical Laboratory Sciences which have 25 students in each course. All students in the first year were considered eligible for this study. The sample size was 200 students. Exclusion criteria were the students who were not familiar with English or Sinhala language. Ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics review committee of the Faculty of Medicine, KDU as well as the Faculty of Defence & Strategic Studies. Verbal consent was obtained from the students before they participated the study after clearly explaining the purpose of the study.

Data Collection

Data was obtained through pre tested self administered questionnaires in both Sinhala & English languages. Questionnaire was designed by the researcher and corrected by the experts of subject area. The questionnaire consisted of 03 parts.

Part I included demographic data including Age, Gender, Type of school attended, Race, Religion and also questions related to awareness of guidance and counselling services provided by the university.

Part II included 25 items assessing knowledge. The items consisted of statements such as general knowledge, aim of guidance and counselling, roles of student and counsellor in the context of guidance and counselling. The students were asked to indicate their knowledge by ticking "Correct" or "Incorrect", one at a time in front of each item in the questionnaire.

Part III included 20 items to assess attitudes towards psychological counselling. The statements were in 03 domains that is, openness towards guidance and counselling, indifference to stigma and help seeking tendency. Students were asked to indicate their feelings by ticking "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "No idea", "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", one at a time in front of each item in the questionnaire.

A pilot test was carried out to pre test the questionnaire. Researcher interviewed randomly selected 05 first year undergraduates of B.Sc. Nursing Programme at University of Sri Jayewardenepura. No modifications required.

Questionnaires were hand delivered to the students who participated in the study. On the day of delivery, the researcher explained the objectives of the study. Students completed the questionnaires either in their classrooms or in designated areas. Completed questionnaires were collected at the same time.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis was carried out by the researcher using the software SPSS version 16.

1) Analysis of Knowledge

The coding system for 25 knowledge measuring statements was as follows.

Table 1. The scoring system to categorize level of knowledge

Score	Grade
>=75	Very Good Knowledge
50 - 74	Good Knowledge
<50	Poor Knowledge

2) Analysis of Attitudes

Coding system for 20 attitude measuring statements was four point Likert type scale that had 4 to 1 in order of Strongly Agree 4 points, Agree 3 points, Disagree 2 points, Strongly Disagree 1 point and No idea 0 points in the positively worded items and the reverse in the negatively worded items. The highest score any respondent could get on attitude towards psychological guidance and counselling was 80 while the average score was 40. With reference to attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling any respondent who scored above 40 was considered as having high/positive attitude. Who scored 39 or below was considered as having low or negative attitude.

RESULTS

177 students (88.5%) participated in the study. 106 were females and 71 were males.

A. Demographic Data

Among participants majority were females (61.6%). Among the total students almost all were Sinhala Buddhists. 50.5% of females preferred to have a female counsellor to offer them guidance and psychological counselling where as 67.6 % males preferred any of them. Only 3.7% females preferred to have a male counsellor.

B. Knowledge Towards Psychological Guidance and Counselling

Students' overall knowledge level towards psychological guidance and counselling were at a higher level. Mean Knowledge level was 78.4 (n = 177). Distribution of knowledge levels among male and female undergraduates are given in Table 3.



Figure 1. Frequency distribution of knowledge towards psychological guidance and counselling

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Item	Percentage(%)
Age	
19 - 21	45.7
22 -24	54.3
Gender	
Male	38.4
Female	61.6
School Attended	
Boys School	16.4
Girls School	41.2
Mixed School	42.4
Race	
Sinhala	99.4
Other	0.6
Religion	
Buddhist	94.9
Hindu	0.0
Catholic	4.5
Islam	0.6
Other	0.0
Awareness of Counseling Services at University	
Yes	75.7
No	24.3
Preference of counsellor	
Male Counsellor	11.9
Female Counsellor	33.9
Any of them	54.3

C. Attitudes towards Psychological guidance and counselling

More than half of the population of students showed negative attitudes towards psychological openness and indifference to stigma. Results for help seeking attitude among males and females were not significant.

Table 3. Knowledge distribution among male and female students

Knowledge Level	Percentage (%)		
	Male	Female	Total
Very Good Knowledge	24.3	44.6	68.9
Good Knowledge	13.6	15.8	29.4
Poor Knowledge	0.6	1.1	1.7
	38.5	61.5	100.0

Table 4. Frequency distribution of attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling

Attitude	Male		Female	
	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
Psychological Openness	51%	49%	55%	45%
Indifference to stigma	56%	44%	56%	44%
Help seeking attitude	49%	51%	50%	50%

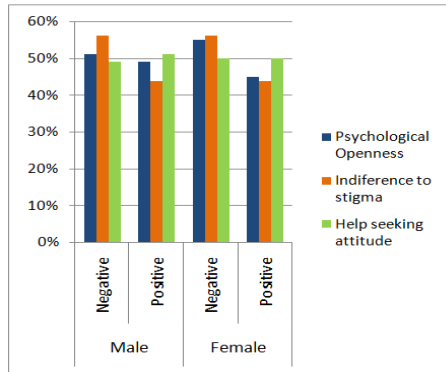


Figure 2. Frequency distribution of Attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling

DISCUSSION

Majority (75.7%) of the students were aware of the counselling services provided by the university. A similar study has done among first year undergraduates at University of Sri Jayewardenepura revealed that more than half (51%) of first year students were unaware of the counselling services at university (De Silva, 2011). Olofintoye (2006) and Gho (1996) has observed that the students in Nigeria and Singapore were ignorant of guidance and counselling services around them. The current study revealed 68.9% of students had very good knowledge (that is, score more than 75%) and 28.3% had a good knowledge (that is, scored 50 – 74) on psychological counselling and guidance (Mean 78.4%). Figure 1 shows the distribution of knowledge levels towards psychological guidance and counselling among all students studied. A study done in Cross River State revealed a significant positive attitude of students towards psychological guidance and counselling (Eyo, Joshua and Esuong, 2010). When compared to that the current study revealed that Sri Lankan students have more negative attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling even though they have a very good knowledge level on that. A study done on help-seeking attitudes shows that female students held more positive attitudes than male students (Yılmaz-Gözü, 2013). Same researchers showed that male students had higher psychological distress and more confidence in mental health professionals while seeking help from an opposite-gender counsellor for academic problems than for personal problems. However, the type of problem (academic and/or personal) made little difference in psychological distress and confidence towards seeking help with a same-gender counsellor. A study done among Turkish high school students (Yılmaz-Gözü, 2013) showed that male students were reluctant to seek help from school counsellors. In contrast the current study revealed that 51% of male students had positive attitudes towards help seeking.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The present study provides some new insights regarding attitudes towards psychological openness, seeking help, indifference to stigma among the first year undergraduates of FAHS, KDU. However, there were some limitations to this study. First, the research was based on data obtained from self-administered questionnaires. Yılmaz-Gözü (2013) states “such data may be biased by social desirability, lack of self-awareness, concern for confidentiality or psychometric limitations”. Attitudes generally reflect people’s actual behaviour (Fischer & Turner, 1970). But, still there is a possibility that students’ actual behaviour may differ from their stated willingness or attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling. Setiawan (2006) proposed “some situational factors might affect the participants, such as lack of time, lack of knowledge about availability of help sources and/or the counselling process”. To address this limitation, researchers could design a comparative study in the future. Yılmaz-Gözü (2013) states “comparing the self-reported attitudes of a sample of people in the process of receiving professional help and another not receiving any help would enable the analysis of differences” between attitudes towards actual behaviours related to psychological counselling. Another limitation of this research was the selection of all participants from one university in Sri Lanka. There is a possibility that participants might not reflect the knowledge and attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling in general among Sri Lankan undergraduates. For future studies, samples could be selected from different universities. The current study does not represent much of cultural diversity among students’ attitudes towards stigma, seeking help and psychological openness. For this reason, it would be informative if further studies could include samples of different populations from various cultures.

Conclusion

Many students had a good knowledge on psychological guidance and counselling. However, their attitudes towards psychological openness, indifference to stigma and help seeking behaviour were negative.

Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my gratitude to Ethics review committee of Faculty of Medicine for granting permission to conduct research at KDU. I thank my Dean, Dr. PTR Makuloluwa for her enormous encouragement and the support throughout the study.

Recommendation

Recommend to conduct workshops or awareness programmes to enhance students’ attitudes towards psychological guidance and counselling services especially during their orientation period and promote future research to provide effective psychological guidance and counselling services for undergraduates of KDU.

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