A Review on the Influencing Factors of College Students' Mental Help-Seeking Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

College students' mental health problems become a popular topic in higher education these days. Professional mental help-seeking behaviors are significant to college students' mental health. There are many existing pieces of research about influencing factors on college students' mental help-seeking behaviors but with a less systematic summary. Therefore, this paper collects information and data about influencing factors of help-seeking behaviors by searching words "mental help-seeking", "psychological help-seeking", "professional mental treatment" mainly in Google Scholar and CNKI. Through studying these data, this study indicated that influencing factors can be divided into external and internal factors respectively, which function can be described as positive or negative. What's more, some controversial and interaction factors are discussed in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to use a new classification of mental help-seeking influencing factors to help colleges establish a more comprehensive plan for future mental health education.

Keywords: College students, Mental help-seeking behaviors, Influencing factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, an unexpected disaster, covid-19, hit the human world suddenly, which not only brings threat to physical health but also increases individual's mental burden. On January 26th, 2020, the National Health Commission of the PRC launched a document named Emergency Psychological Crisis Intervention Principles of the Covid-19 to encourage patients, medical staff, and normal citizens to receive mental assistance positively. From then on, mental help-seeking behaviors became more acceptable in China these days.

Gourash(1978) indicated that help-seeking behaviors happen when people are confronted by problems or troublesome events that need more resources than they can provide alone. Mental help-seeking behaviors, especially refer to professional mental assistance, but not daily conversations with friends or family[1]. After studying foreign literature on mental help-seeking behaviors, some Chinese local researchers began to conduct their research on this field in Chinese local background[2-4]. Based on domestic and foreign studies on psychological help-seeking behaviors, it is not hard to find that mental disorders are highly prevalent among college studies[5-7]. However, researchers also found that there is a rather a low rate of college students receiving professional treatment, which may be associated with a longer course of illness and more frequent relapses[8-10]. Although much literature made a research on mental help-seeking behaviors or the barriers that hinder people's help-seeking[11-14], there was a lack of brief classification to divide those factors into external and internal parts. Additionally, some researchers also found that there is a lack of evidence on how campus-level interventions, policies, and resources affect help-seeking [15]. Therefore, this paper aims to provide available advice for colleges to arrange and establish a better plan on mental health education by using a new classification.

This paper will be divided as below. Some external and internal factors will be introduced respectively in the first place, which can be described as positive or negative functions. Within this part, some controversial and interaction factors would be discussed. Last but not the least, this paper intends to offer a better solution to college students' mental problems and make a possible promotion on their mental health level.

2. EXTERNAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

2.1 Positive external factors

Social support is a significant factor that influences college students' mental state. Xiao and Yang(1987) concluded the definition of social support on foreign exiting studies and designed a scale of social support to assess how detailed items influenced mental health. They distinguished the definition into two parts, including emotional social support and physical social support[16]. Through this social support scale and SPSS, researchers found that each point that social support increases, the possibility of help-seeking happening would also increase 0.215 times than before, which indicated a positive correlation between social support and mental help-seeking behaviors[17]. Hefner and Eisenberg(2009) also found that students with lower quality social support were more likely to suffer mental disorders, including a sixfold risk of depressive symptoms compared with students with high-quality social support[18]. Therefore, when someone can receive more support from the outside world no matter emotionally or physically, it seemed they can have more possibility to find professional mental treatment when facing mental disorders, which means social support has a positive function on mental help-seeking behaviors generally.

2.2 Negative external factors

When people talk about the topic of Asian or Chinese traditional culture, it is not difficult for everyone to remind some positive words to describe Chinese people, such as patient, polite, enthusiastic, persistent, and so on. However, when it comes to the topic of mental help-seeking behaviors, some previous literature showed that some features within Chinese traditional culture might hinder college students to obtain mental treatment[19-21]. Some researchers used the word Relational Concerns to illuminate how it hinders help-seeking among college students. They found relational concerns, including burdening others, being judged by others, concerning face loss and group harmony, hinder the happening of help-seeking among college students[13]. Yeh(2002) found some students will consider mental problems or mental help-seeking behaviors as powerless, coward behaviors when he made a research on college students in Tai Wan, China[19]. Lin(2002) also earned a similar result that Chinese students who believed in traditional proverbs more, who insist to solve problems by themselves, but not seeking help from others[20]. Wang(2013) used the word Asian Culture to explain how Asian traditional culture hindered college students' mental health-seeking behaviors. The research found that even western culture had a shock on Asian students, they still have a strong local identity as an Asian. Students

with a lower level of Asian values had more positive attitudes towards help-seeking and were more willing to seek professional psychological help[21]. This result provided reasonable evidence to explain how Asian culture hindered college students' mental help-seeking behaviors and further affirm the negative function of the conservative element of Asian culture.

2.3 Controversial external factor

Sometimes, the family factor is considered as a part of social support which was discussed above, but the family factor itself already contains many detailed items, such as marriage relationships, parental behaviors, parent-children conversation way, and so on, more scholars took the family factor as a single topic to discuss. Some researchers indicated the positive function of parental support, who explained that lack of parental support is associated with hesitancy in seeking professional help[7], while some researchers take the family factor as a controversial one[22-23].

Liu(2021) found parents can have positive or negative effects on children's attitudes towards mental treatment[22]. It can be explained that when the family atmosphere is harmonious and stable, which means parents can easily feel children's mental problems, they might make guidance for their children and lead them to professional mental help, thus improving the possibility of seeking help. However, if parents can solve children's mental problems in the family, their children may not have the necessity to seek help from outside professional mental facilities. Even parents may not solve the mental problem fundamentally, but it does lower the possibility of help-seeking behaviors at that time.

On the other hand, Wang(2015) demonstrated a new idea that children choosing father or mother would also bring different effects on mental help-seeking behaviors[23]. In particular, children who consulted with their mother can solve their mental problems under mothers' kindly help to some degree, which means there will be a lower possibility of seeking help outside. On the contrary, when the kids chose their father to share their mental feeling, they may more likely be supported to consult other professional medical staff, which improve the possibility of mental help-seeking.

Taken together, it can be concluded that the critical point of these two explanations is whether children's mental problems can be solved in the family degree or not. If a problem can be solved or buffered in the family, children are less likely to consult professional medical staff. If they cannot figure them out in the family, they may try to ask for help from the outside world. This paper finds the complexity of family factor in this way, which need more empirical research to prove in the future.

3. INTERNAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

3.1 Positive internal factors

Adequate research found that a positive personality can promote mental help-seeking behaviors. Researchers examined how personal emotional openness relates to college students' psychological help-seeking behaviors and finally confirmed that personal emotion is a primary reason to explain college students' negative attitude towards help-seeking[24].

In terms of self-initiative, Robitschek(1998) proposed that self-initiative was a positive personality that reflects someone would able to develop and improve themselves consciously and positively[25]. This definition is also used by Chinese scholars to explore the relationship between self-initiative and college mental help-seeking behaviors from then on. Result demonstrated that self-initiative have an obvious positive effect on mental help-seeking behaviors with every item inside the self-initiative scale showing a positive correlation with college students' mental help-seeking attitude[26].

Moreover, confidence in consultation also means a lot to college students' choice of receiving mental treatment. Researchers found that skepticism about treatment effectiveness has become an important barrier factor that hinders college students' psychological help-seeking behaviors[11]. Zhao, Jiang, and Wang(2011) found that if college students are equipped with more mental health knowledge and feel more confident on the professional medical staff, they will tend to ask them for help and better solve their mental disorders[27].

Therefore, no matter self-initiative or confidence in consultation, a positive personality can improve the possibility of college students' help-seeking behaviors to some degree. It can be concluded as a positive function to mental help-seeking behaviors.

3.2 Negative internal factors

Mental illness stigma is a common problem in nowadays society. Mental illness stigma was defined as a bad stereotype or an insulting or depreciating lag to someone, which is quite unfair for mental illness patients. Researchers found that stigmatizing attitudes of students about mental illness were associated with lower help-seeking behavior[12]. Some researchers insisted that higher self-stigma and younger age were linked to negative psychological help-seeking attitudes, thus college should make efforts to reduce the negative function of stigma[28]. Mental illness stigma can be divided into a public one and a personal one. This part will mainly study the relationship between personal mental illness stigma and college students' mental help-

seeking behaviors and also introduce some mediating effect that happens through mental illness stigma, which will be called interaction factors in this paper.

Firstly, self-stigma hurts mental help-seeking behaviors obviously because it will bring mental illness patients into the trap of mental problem, which make them afraid of this problem and also afraid of others' misunderstanding. Several studies pointed out that self-stigma is a barrier to actual mental help-seeking and efforts to reduce it are urgently needed[12, 28].

Apart from direct function toward mental help-seeking behaviors, some other elements are interactive with each other based on stigma's negative function, and finally, change the formal function generated by mental illness stigma. For example, a positive personality like self-initiative can buffer the negative function, which means when someone is holding a positive attitude to his own life and being glad to learn more for better growth, even mental illness stigma becoming a common phenomenon around the world, they can escape from this trap easier[29]. On the other hand, Chinese or Asian traditional culture may aggravate the negative function of stigma. Researchers pointed out that Chinese people care much about others' thoughts, especially the mental illness patients in China obsessed with whether outside can accept their mental disorder or not, but not focus on solving a problem[30]. This kind of culture hinders the happening of mental help-seeking behaviors. Thus this paper found that part of this traditional thought may aggravate the bad effect of mental illness stigma. Therefore, not only does mental illness stigma itself has a direct negative effect on psychological help-seeking, some other factors like self-initiative and traditional culture can adjust the function of stigma and influence mental help-seeking indirectly.

3.3 Controversial internal factors

Self-efficacy, referring to confidence, or belief that helps someone solve problems or achieve goals, become a famous research topic in the field of mental help-seeking behavior presently[31]. In general speaking, the person who has high-level self-efficacy is usually considered as a powerful or confident person that can face their problem correctly and solve problems by themselves. Under this explanation, a person with high-level self-efficacy would not seek mental help from others. However, from other existing literature, the function of self-efficacy towards mental help-seeking might be controversial.

Yu(2004) thought that there are two kinds of definitions of self-efficacy[32]. One of them is the general meaning which is introduced above while another one is represented as consultant self-efficacy. Consultant self-efficacy shows its different influence tendency from the general meaning of self-efficacy, which tends to have

a positive effect on mental help-seeking behaviors. The reason for this different tendency is because the researcher put consultant self-efficacy right inside the process of mental treatment, which means a person with high-level consultant self-efficacy is more likely to finish the current consultation and willing to accept the next one. Therefore, these two types of self-efficacy are happened at the different processes of mental help-seeking behaviors and also have a different effect on help-seeking.

Not only different kinds of self-efficacy would have a different effect on mental help-seeking behaviors, but different levels of self-efficacy also bring different functions. As mentioned before, high-level self-efficacy hurts mental help-seeking, but on its counterpart, low-level self-efficacy cannot be simply concluded as a factor that has a positive effect from some studies. Karabenick and Knap(1991) argued that seeking help from outside is not easy but even a hard move for students with an extremely low-level self-efficacy[33]. Butler and Newman(1995) also pointed out that either too high or too low self-efficacy promotes the happening of mental help-seeking behaviors, and only the middle level of self-efficacy can influence mental help-seeking effectively[34]. Thus, the different levels of self-efficacy also have a different effect on mental help-seeking behaviors.

4. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this paper is to gather important factors that would improve or hinder the possibility of college mental help-seeking behaviors, to offer a better solution or more comprehensive plan for college future building on mental health education. Therefore, in this part, this paper will discuss two points that are worth further research, including controversial factors and interaction factors about mental illness stigma that are mentioned above. Through discussion, this study tends to find out a better solution during the process of arranging these factors in mental help-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, some limitations will be discussed.

As for controversial factors, family factors, and self-efficacy in external and internal factors respectively. Both of these two factors are complicated and have different functions on mental help-seeking behaviors in different processes or different levels.

In terms of family factors, whether children's mental problems can be solved or buffered in family degree become the critical point that decided this factor have a positive or negative effect on mental help-seeking. High-level family support and mother's consultation can help children solve the mental problem, and make this factor present a negative correlation with psychological help-seeking behaviors. However, can people earn a simple conclusion that mother's consultation or family support should be reduced to improve professional consultation?

The answer is negative here. Although asking for help from professional medical staff could be a credible and efficient choice, the functions of family consultation cannot be denied. This review support that non-professional consultation and professional consultation combine, and are inclined to one side depending on the detailed situation, like the severity of mental problem or accessibility of professional mental treatment.

As for self-efficacy, another controversial factor that was mentioned before also has a different effect on mental help-seeking behaviors. Existing studies affirmed the important role of self-efficacy as a factor that influence college student mental help-seeking behaviors [2, 32]. However, further research is needed to solve problems like which level of self-efficacy can affect help-seeking the most, or how self-efficacy takes effect on help-seeking in practice in detail.

Apart from family factors and self-efficacy, this paper also mentioned some interaction factors that take effect together. Under the negative background of mental illness stigma, this paper gave two examples, positive personality and Chinese traditional culture to prove that different factors can adjust the function of others, and finally buffer or aggravate the negative function generated by mental illness stigma [29, 30]. This outcome can help further study pay more attention to factors like mental illness stigma, which not only have an effect on help-seeking solely but also take effect with other factors. Moreover, researchers found that anti-stigma intervention improves help-seeking behaviors possibility among college students effectively [35].

However, some limitations are existing in this paper. Firstly, more factors can be added to this classification to complement further studies on mental help-seeking behaviors. Controversial factors need more empirical research to prove their function to help-seeking in a different processor at different levels. Last but not the least, interaction factors should not be limited by mental illness stigma. More factors can adjust or mediate others' functions towards mental help-seeking behaviors. Therefore, further research can focus on this field and try to complete the research gap within mental help-seeking behaviors in China.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes factors that influence college students' mental help-seeking behaviors and make a classification of these factors. These factors are divided into external and internal factors and were described as positive or negative functions towards college students' psychological help-seeking behaviors. From this classification, the specific function of each factor can be explained clearly and help pay more attention to the positive-function factors and avoid the negative ones. What's more, this paper found some factors that may

have both positive and negative functions to mental help-seeking, which is called controversial factors in this paper and also found out some factors that can adjust each other when they exist together. Based on this paper, colleges can set up a more suitable mental health education project for college students. Within this project, more attention should be placed on how to take advantage of the positive factors and avoid the negative ones. Under Chinese educational background, college should take full use of patriotic education, but also make correct guidance for college students in terms of traditional culture. Making effort on appealing to the correct view of mental illness and mental treatment can help reduce the negative function of mental illness stigma.

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