

The original reason that influences international students' help-seeking behavior: Familiarity

Zhoujun Sun

University Preparatory Program in Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts

Abstract

Mental illness comes along with the increasing pressure brought by new college life to international students. When a student is in mental health trouble, the most helpful thing to do is seek for professional help for mental illness. However, a lack of help-seeking behavior occurs among international students. There is one main finding: the unfamiliarity to the counselor decrease the help-seeking behavior. The finding may help colleges to set up a more helpful and targeted mental services for international students.

Introduction

Help-seeking, a very common action people take when they are in trouble, is an uncommon behavior among college students, especially international students. Life and academic stress and peer pressure leave heavy burden on students' shoulder. Meanwhile, unfamiliar live place, isolation, no support, lack of reliable relationships in the new environment, "culture shock", sexual and racial prejudice and so on are troubles that are accused of making international students' adaption to new place stressful or difficult (Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2007). Under this kind of situation, students' stress gradually accumulates and some of college students cannot adapt to the dramatic change of workload and life pace, so they break down physically: being sick. However, a noticeable part of the stressed-out students get mental illness, which they don't even notice or, worse, they are reluctant to admit and seek help. Help-seeking is rare among mentally problematic international students and the reasons behind this phenomenon are still not clear. This review is going to figure out what is relating to the resistance to help-seeking.

Literature Review

As the investigators have studied, the reasons behind the reluctance to seek help

can be divided into two parts: cultural part and environmental part.

Cultural part

The basic reason of this behavior is probably the original culture characters. Culture characters are mainly resulted from culture values. And according to researchers from Illinois Institute of Technology, following culture values, there're some sub-factors: "public stigma" and "self-stigma". Firstly, cultural characters such as being afraid of "losing one's face" (being shameful because of doing something wrong) and reluctance to admit one is suffering because of others are found to influence the help-seeking behavior (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014). And denial of being suffering because of probable showing weakness may also contribute to the effect. Meanwhile, values relating to health from people's hometown also contribute to not using mental services (as cited in Chen & Lewis, 2011). According to Lee and colleagues, adherence to original values could also affect help-seeking behaviors. For instance, Kim and Omizo found in 2003 that Asian Americans who strongly adhere to culture values held more negative attitude toward those with seemingly weak connection to culture values. Also, with strong adherence, people might be more reluctant to see a counselor (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014).

Furthermore, the stigma to psychological help-seeking is also a main factor. Stigma related to mental illness and treatment is most repeatedly mentioned as the reason of people's lack of behavior of finding help for mental services (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014). The first part: public stigma. Public stigma has been described as "the negative reactions that the general population has toward a stigmatized group" (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014). In a group study, 25% people would refuse to require mental help when they "perceived a need for help", partly due to that they worry about other's thoughts toward them (as cited in Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, & Zivin, 2009). The other one is self-stigma. Self-stigma is considered as the decrease in the self-respect of a person as result of the person identifying him/herself as "socially unacceptable". Moreover, it is found that public stigma is ingrained as self-stigma. Additionally, public stigma is "positively related to" self-stigma (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014).

Environmental part

When international students get into colleges in the first year, they have environmental factors that may influence their help-seeking actions: different cultural background, unfamiliar foreign people, and privacy. When it comes to the time the students should find a counselor to talk about his or her problems, different cultural background becomes the biggest obstacle. In an interview, Chen & Lewis (2011) interrogated several participants who are international students, they reflected that because their problems may come due to their own culture and ethics, therapists from different background or culture probably cannot completely understand them and their moods and sensations, but “culturally similar therapists” can. Meanwhile, disbelief caused by unfamiliarity to the counselors may also be one cause. According to a Korean woman in an interview about help-seeking, strangers are not trustful and if people do not trust a stranger counselor, how can they tell the full story and share all their concerns and secrets? Furthermore, the thing that meeting a counselor or a therapist itself is considered shameful by some people; and one of a participant in the interview worries about the potentials that her problems talking to counselors would be exposed in any ways. She is afraid of being an anonymous example in a classes or discussion (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, people do care about their privacy even though their information is hidden.

To conclusion, the adherence to the original culture, the public’s perception, and the individual’s own thoughts--known as cultural factors--combine with incomprehension because of different background, disbelief due to unfamiliarity to the therapist, and concerns of privacy--known as environmental factors--to be the probable reason of the lack of help--seeking behavior.

However, there’re some factors that do enhance the willingness to seek for mental services. First one is cultural influence. According to a participant in the interview, in America, people are more willing and receptive to seek for mental help. Another participant said that “They love therapy.” And several participants admitted that after seeing Americans’ attitude toward counseling, they now treat it differently. They came to consider it more normal and they could be willing and voluntary to go to see a therapist when they not feel good. And it is indeed that no matter which sexuality they are or how long they have spent in America, international students, who have more acculturation to American culture, show more positive attitude toward requiring for

proficient psychological help (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Secondly, the sense of collective can also help solving the problem. Given the “collectivistic and interdependent cultural orientations”, people in a group counseling may get reduction of the shameful feelings and get support and validation from others that have similar background, which is essential to the counseling. However, it may also backfire because of lack of privacy. Moreover, it depends on people’s preference to counseling formats (as cited in Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014).

Methodology

In fall of 2016, I conducted an online survey considering feeling about mental services under several different situations. I asked my teacher to send it out for me. The survey was sent out in the range of University Preparatory Program¹ in Tufts University and to some of international students in Tufts University. In all, 16 people participate in it. I put 7 questions and set the format of answer as number symboling the degree of willingness.

“1 means extremely uncomfortable

2 means just reluctant

3 means not refuse but not very welcome

4 means willing to

5 means eager to”

Below is what I got through this online survey:

How do you feel about telling a stranger your personal stressful & depressing things?

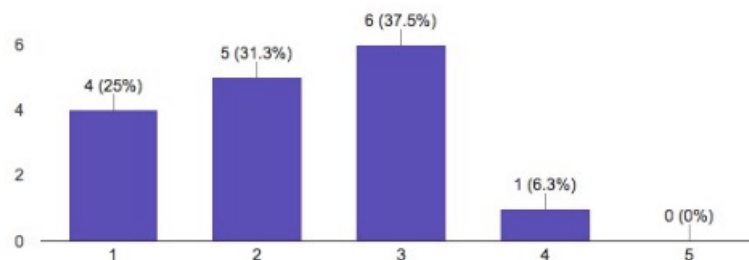


Figure 1

University Preparatory Program: A program that Chinese students first study in Wuhan, China, and then come to Tufts University to study and prepare for future college life.

How do you feel if this person is a foreigner?

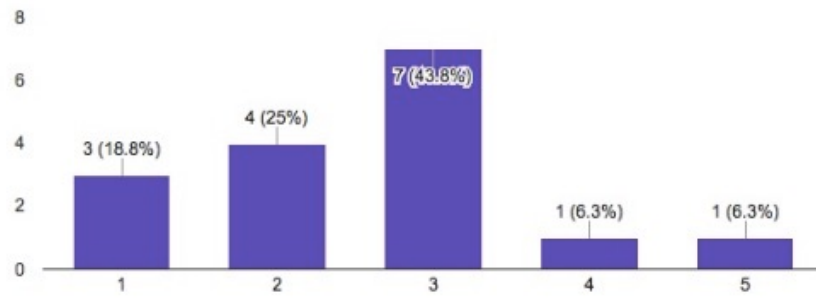


Figure 2

How do you feel if this person is a person from your region/area/culture/background?

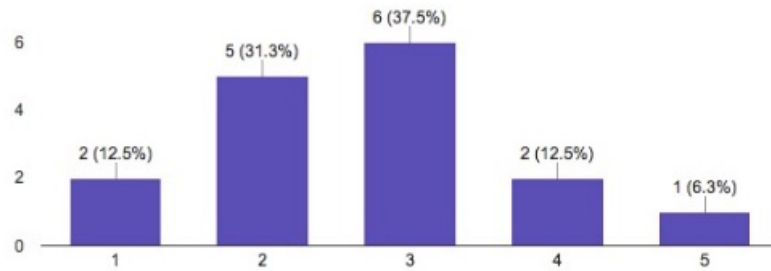


Figure 3

How do you feel if this person is a person you know?

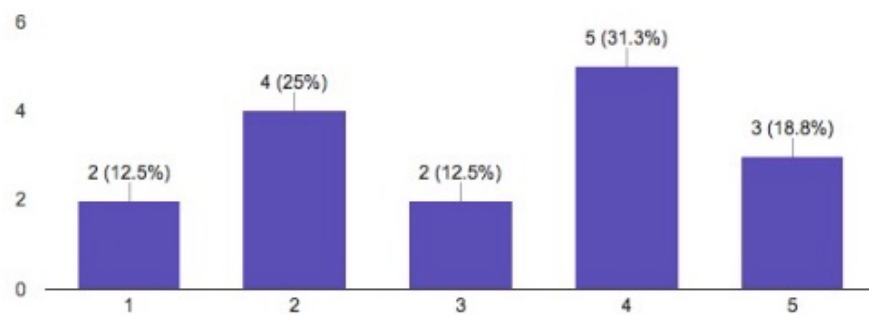


Figure 4

How do you feel if you are told to go to see a therapist?

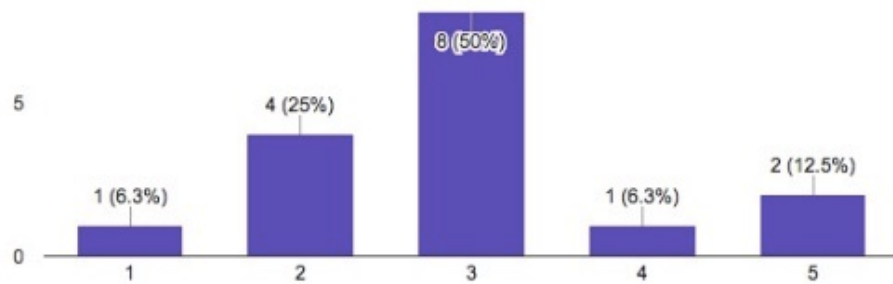


Figure 5

How did you feel about it before you came to America?

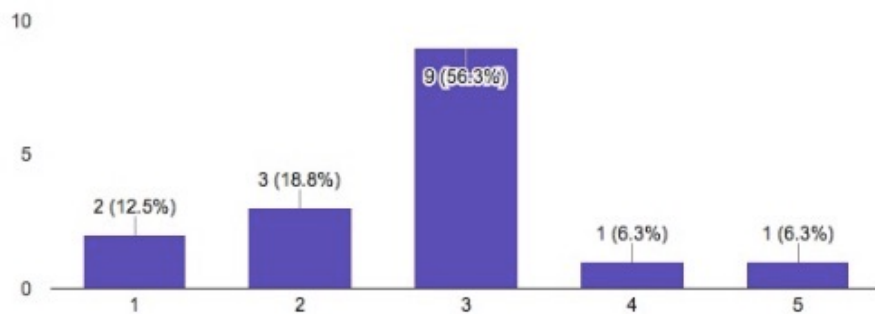


Figure 6

How do you feel about it after you came to America?

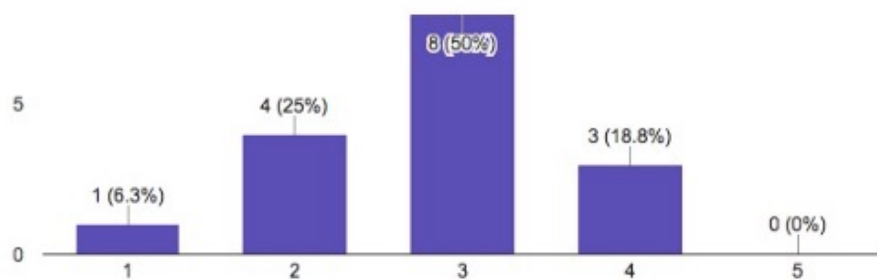


Figure 7

Result

As shown in Figure 1, most of the participants are not very willing to share their personal stress to a stranger. And from Figure 1 to Figure 4, as the familiarity to the listener increases in the situations in the problems, the tendency to “eager to” increases.

Probably, familiarity is positively correlated to willingness. According to Figure 5, people have different attitude toward mental services. However, the change of attitude of seeing a therapist from before coming to the U.S. to after coming to the U.S. is contradicting to what I've learned before. People tend to be more unwilling to see a therapist after coming to America.

Discussion

In this study of a group of international students, the main finding is that this result demonstrates the positive correlation between the familiarity of international students to their story listeners and their willingness to seek for mental help. This may implicate some factors. Firstly, similar people can understand international students' personal troubles. For example, like what a participant said in that interview mentioned before, under the condition that the counselor "was short and people laughed at him", it would be more helpful to students with these personal connections. Secondly, people from similar background can understand special problems brought by culture. Because it is true that sometimes some cultural belief and customs cannot be easily understood by people from other totally different cultures. Further, the tendency to "eager to" also demonstrates the positive correlation between the degree of trust and the willingness. A familiar person is more trustful than a stranger to normal people, especially international students because they have few supports and useful relationships between themselves and the surrounding communities, so they might be more willing to talk to a person that they are more familiar with, in other words, person more trustful.

The feelings change shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7 may cause by the special situation of the UPP program. Because before coming to America, students don't live together after class. However, for students' security, after they came to America, they lived together in a hotel and if they need to go out, they need to ask for teachers' permission, which means that, previously in China, if students want to go to see a therapist, they can just go; however, in America, they need to tell teachers and get a person go with them, which may make them feel shameful. Therefore, they may become more unwilling to go to see a therapist.

However, the results of this survey might not be very reliable because the number of the sample is too small to eliminate the outsider and meaningless response. 16 is not enough to remove the possibility of answering randomly or disruptively. There are 2

out of 16 answers that chose 1 for all questions. Hence, this consequence is largely unbelievable.

But simply based on what I got, I think it a useful point that international students are more willing to share their stories and feelings to familiar people. In my opinion, considering the increasingly high rate of depression and suicide among international student in American universities, schools may consider hire people from different cultural background or people from multi-cultural background to help students more effectively. Last time when I visited Bryn Mawr College, when I asked the campus tour guide, who majors in clinical psychology, that whether there are counselors from different cultural background, she said that that's a good idea and she didn't think about it before, so she would suggest to the mental services center. Some of universities may still don't realize this point. I suggest colleges to try to work on it to provide not only services, but also helpful services to students, especially international students.

And this paper just talks about few of the reasons that cause the lack of help-seeking behavior among international students in America because of the limitation of the research, so the consequence and findings may not be absolutely reliable and accurate.

References

Chen, H.-M., & Lewis, D. C. (2011). Approaching the “Resistant:” Exploring East Asian

International Students’ Perceptions of Therapy and Help-Seeking Behavior Before

and After They Arrived in the United States. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 33(3),

310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-011-9154-6>

Eisenberg, D., Downs, M. F., Golberstein, E., & Zivin, K. (2009). Stigma and help seeking

for mental health among college students. *Medical Care Research and Review:*

MCRR, 66(5), 522–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077558709335173>

Lee, E.-J., Ditchman, N., Fong, M. W. M., Piper, L., & Feigon, M. (2014). Mental Health

Service Seeking Among Korean International Students in the United States: A Path

Analysis. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(6), 639–655.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21643>

Russell, J., Thomson, G., & Rosenthal, D. (2008). International student use of university

health and counselling services. *Higher Education*, 56(1), 59–75.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9089-x>