

**EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPOSURE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS AND
AVAILABLE COUNSELLING SERVICES ON COUNSELLING-SEEKING
BEHAVIOUR AMONG IN-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS IN OWERRI MUNICIPAL,
IMO STATE.**

By

Chimankpam Amadiogwu

chimamkpamu@gmail.com

Osorochi Patricia Obi

obi.osorochi@mouau.edu.ng

&

Christy Ngozi Nwaoba

Department of Guidance and Counselling,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State.

Abstract

This study explored the effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services on low counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State, Nigeria. The study adopted a quasi-experimental design employing the pre-test-post-test, non-randomized control group design. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The sample of the study consisted of 40 in-school adolescents purposively sampled from a population 578 in-school adolescents identified as having low counselling-seeking behaviour. A 21-item questionnaire titled Intention to Seek Counselling Services Questionnaire (ISCSQ) was used to collect data. The instrument was validated by three experts in the field with stability index of 0.86 and internal consistency of 0.77. Psychological conditions and available counselling services were exposed to those in the treatment group for six sessions of 45 minutes each for a period of three weeks while the control group was a waitlist group. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The result showed that psychological conditions and available counselling services (PCCS) was effective in enhancing the level of counselling-seeking behaviour among in-school adolescents with low counselling-seeking behaviour at post-test. There were no gender differences in the level of counselling-seeking behaviour in the treatment groups and control at post-test period. It was thus recommended that school counsellors should expose

psychological conditions and available counselling services (PCCS) to students with low counselling-seeking behaviour.

Keywords: Psychological Conditions, Counselling Services, Counselling-Seeking Behaviour, In-School Adolescents

Introduction

Counselling involves increasing an individual's sense of well-being and reducing discomforting feelings. Counselling is a professional process which occurs when a counsellor and a client meet voluntarily to enhance the psychological well-being of a client. It takes place when a counsellee seeks counselling and the counsellor, after a careful analysis, applies appropriate techniques in the counselling process (Goss, 2014). Counselling can be extremely beneficial for anyone regardless of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or educational background. Everybody at one point or the other in one's life needs counselling.

Counselling-seeking behaviour is a decision-making process in which action is preceded by recognizing a problem and a conscious decision to seek help (Tomczyk et al., 2020). It is assumed that counselling-seeking behaviour is any action of energetically seeking help from the counselling services which includes understanding, guidance, treatment and general support when facing troubles or encountering stressful circumstances or wanting more information to facilitate decision-making.

Counselling-seeking behaviour has been shown to be a complex decision – making process instigated by a distress or problem that challenges the abilities of an individual to perform well. It is characterized by the following attributes: problem focused, intentional action and interpersonal interaction (Cornally & McCarthy in Tomczyk et al, 2020).

Counselling-seeking behaviour is a fundamental behaviour in young people for their mental health and well-being and it is considered a protective factor in the health and development of adolescents. Adolescent counselling-seeking behaviour can be defined as the explicit expression by an adolescent of the need for personal or psychological distress (Cometto, 2014). It is about an adolescent communicating with professional counsellor to get help in response to his or her problem or stressful experience. Before seeking counselling, it is necessary that the adolescent recognizes his or her distress as a mental health concern. Seeking counselling

implies that the adolescent holds constructive cognitions, beliefs and attitudes regarding the professional help he/she may receive (McPhail et al., 2024). The adolescent must be convinced that the psychological distress or problem may be changed through a counselling intervention. Seeking counselling also requires the availability of counselling services and counsellors in the adolescent's immediate environment.

Adolescents are young people between the period of childhood and adulthood. It is a unique stage of human development and an important time for laying the foundations of good mental health. Seeking counselling services has been shown to be a significant predictor of academic performance, adjustment to school, retention, graduation, health, life styles and graduation rates (Cholew & Ramaswami, 2015). Unfortunately, it has been shown that only a small percentage of these adolescents who could benefit from such services, actually seek them (Masuda, et al in Anderson, 2018). Adolescents are less likely to seek counselling for their personal and psychological difficulties compared to adults. By observation, In-school adolescents' counselling seeking behaviour seems to be poor compared to the general population. Studies have shown that only 26.9% of students in the U.S. with psychological distress which require consultation sought help from professionals (Gebreegziabher, et al., 2019). Various other studies support the finding that students have a low counselling help-seeking rate from professionals (e.g. counsellors, psychologists) ranging from 12.9% to 30.5% (Garcia-Williams, et al., 2014; Puthran, et al., 2016). A two-year cohort study among Finland high school students reported that only one-fifth of those who experience mental health disorder sought professional help (Frojd et al. in Gebreegziabher, et al., 2019). In follow-up study, less than half of the students reported seeking treatment for their psychological problems (Zivin et al. in Gebreegziabher, et al., 2019).

Researchers have continued to document the unmet mental health needs of adolescents. Kessler, et al. (2012) found that as many as 75 – 80% of adolescents with personal and psychological difficulties do not seek needed counselling services. The situation is more severe in Africa, as proved by a study among Nigerian students where very few students (1.5%) who experience psychological disorders sought counselling (Aluh, et al., 2018).

Several factors such as lack of availability of counselling services in schools, a lack of dissemination of information about how to get help from schools, confidentiality issues, or stigma can lead in-school adolescents who experience psychological distress to avoid help-seeking (Hillard, 2019).

In addition to the barriers, it has been shown that adolescents simply may not know much about counselling services. They may think these services are only for people with severe mental illnesses, or they may be unaware of the counselling services available to them. Studies have shown that most of the studies surveyed were aware of the counselling services but saw it as a crisis-intervention service. It appears that many students have an inaccurate understanding of the mental health services available. This calls for attempt to be made to provide programmes geared towards enlightenment and creation of awareness on the services available to them and what it can do for them.

Given the aforementioned barriers to seeking psychological help, there is a continued need to find ways to break down barriers to seeking counselling services. There is a growing policy interest in developing early intervention programmes to reduce barriers to adolescent help-seeking (Olivari & Guzman-Gonzalez, 2017). Adequate and effective interventions that promote help-seeking are necessary for enhancing prevention, early detection, timely treatment and recovery from mental health problems. Previous systematic reviews on interventions targeting help-seeking reveal some promising results with regard to improving mental health literacy (Gulliver et al. 2012 in Sagar-Ouriagli, Godfrey, et al., 2020) and a significant positive overall effect of these interventions in enhancing counselling for psychological problems (Xu, et al., 2018). This is why Walitzer, et al. in Amadiogwu (2015) suggested beginning therapy by addressing negative client reactions to treatment. There are also suggestions that educational programmes be designed to break down obstacles to the pursuit of treatment. It is in pursuit of this that this study focused on utilizing exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services to enhance counselling –seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State.

The exposure to psychological condition and available counselling services is psycho-educational intervention aimed at exposing individuals to the knowledge, recognition, and understanding of psychological conditions and available counselling services for these problems. It is vital to raise exposure or awareness of psychological conditions and identify students who may be at risk for such problems (Kutcher et al., 2015). Such exposures have raised awareness of psychological and mental issues and effectively changed in-school adolescents' attitudes towards psychological conditions (Giroux & Geiss, 2019). These psychological conditions include educational, vocational, personal and social conditions.

Mental health exposure and awareness- raising can normalize seeking help and motivate in-school adolescents to take action when they need help.

Providing information and educating in-school adolescents about their psychological and personal difficulties, and counselling services available for them are essential part of counselling practice. This type of programme generally includes providing in-school adolescents with information about treatments, mental health conditions, and counselling services (Motlova et. al., 2017). Recognizing the importance of exposing potential clients to their psychological conditions and access to available counselling services has emerged to provide support, guidance and treatment options for them.

It has been observed that gender plays a significant role in the inclination to seek psychological help. However, no consensus exists on which gender is more willing to seek help. Some studies have suggested that girls tend to seek help less than boys because they exhibit shy behaviours when seeking help for psychological difficulties (Molla, 2022). In contrast, other studies have indicated that women tend to seek psychological help more than men (Nam et al. in Guney, et al., 2024). Some studies have attempted to examine the reasons for help-seeking behaviour in detail by focusing on a single gender group (Shea et al., 2017; Parnell & Hammer, 2018). In this context, the study attempts to examine gender differences in the effectiveness of psychological conditions and available counselling services on counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State. The objective is to provide more precise information on whether gender will respond equally when exposed to psychological conditions and available counselling services.

Despite these suggestions, there is paucity of research on the effect of Exposure to Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services on counselling-seeking behaviour among in-school adolescents. It is to fill this gap that this study investigated the effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling Services in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State.

Statement of the problem

Given the benefits and effectiveness of counselling to successfully address psychological and interpersonal difficulties, many in-school adolescents should seek and access counselling

services. In-school adolescents experience certain levels of academic, psychological and interpersonal difficulties. The researcher during the practicum experience observed that some in-school adolescents did not seek counselling when they experienced psychological difficulties, did not come for career counselling, subject selection or academic challenges which showed that they have low counselling-seeking behaviour. These hinder the assistance that should be provided to enable them to solve these challenges.

Considering the damaging effect of low counselling-seeking behaviour, there is need to help in-school adolescents enhance their counselling-seeking behaviour. Many researchers have conducted studies on enhancing positive attitude towards counselling and reducing counselling stigma using mental health education, but the treatments have yielded low success rate. The effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services on counselling-seeking behaviour among in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State has not been investigated. The problem of the study, therefore, put in question form is: What is the effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services on counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services on counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the effectiveness of psychological conditions and available counselling services (PCCS) in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents and control at posttest period.
2. determine if there are gender differences in the effectiveness of PCCS at posttest period.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the mean score difference in the effectiveness of PCCS in enhancing the counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents and the control at posttest period?

2. What is the mean score difference in the effectiveness of PCCS in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents at posttest period by gender?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance to guide the study.

H₀₁: There is no significant mean score difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour between those in PCCS group and control group at posttest period in Owerri Municipal, Imo State.

H₀₂: There is no significant gender difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents among the PCCS at posttest period.

Methodology

The study investigated effectiveness of exposure to psychological conditions and available counselling services on counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents in Owerri Municipal, Imo State. This study adopted quasi-experimental research design employing pre-test, post-test, non-randomized control group design using 2x2 factorial matrix. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The population was 578 (Male 298 and Female 280) students who were screened to have low counselling-seeking behaviour in Owerri Municipal, Imo State. The sample of the study comprised 40 students identified to have low counselling-seeking behaviour selected using researcher's screening instrument named Intention to Seek Counselling Services Questionnaire (ISCSQ). The sample was drawn using purposive sampling techniques to draw those who have low counselling-seeking behaviour from the schools that have the highest number of those with poor counselling-seeking behaviour. A 21-item instrument titled: "Intention to Seek Counselling Services Questionnaire (ISCSQ)" was used for this study. This was adapted from the Intentions to Seek Counselling Inventory (ISCI) designed by Cash, Begley, McCrown, and Weise in 1975. The ISCSQ is a 4 point likert scale (1= very unlikely to 4 = very likely) that measures respondents' intention to seek counselling if they experienced a variety of specific problems. The instrument was validated by three experts in the field. Test-retest reliability method was used to determine the stability of the instrument which yielded the coefficient of 0.86 using Person Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at two weeks interval. Test of reliability for the internal consistency of

the instrument was measured using Cronbach Alpha and the results indicate an index value of 0.77 showing that the internal consistency is high and therefore suitable for the study. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher.

Experimental procedure: The treatment sessions were conducted in three stages namely: pre-treatment, treatment and post-test. In the pre-treatment stage, the researcher familiarized with the subjects after getting permission from the principals. The researcher administered the questionnaire on the subjects to get data which formed the baseline data for the study. Venue, time and days of meetings were fixed, contract form signed and confidentiality and rapport established. The treatment stage involved one treatment group and one control group. The students were exposed to the treatment package namely: Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS). The exposure lasted for 45 minutes per session, and for period of 6 weeks and 12 sessions. The one treatment group received treatment while the control was a waitlist group. The treatment was terminated when the goal of the counselling was achieved. Research questions were answered with mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using the ANCOVA.

Results:

Research Question One: What is the mean score difference in the effectiveness of PCCS in enhancing the counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents and the control at posttest period?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Mean Score Differences in the Effectiveness of PCCS in Enhancing the Counselling-Seeking Behaviour of In-School Adolescents and the Control at Posttest Period

Groups	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean increase	Mean Diff.
		X	SD	X	SD		
PCCS	20	1.92	0.08	3.68	0.09	1.76	1.74
Control	20	1.88	0.09	1.90	0.09	0.02	

Data showed that the subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to PCCS had a pre-test mean score of 1.92 with a standard deviation of 0.08 and a post-test mean score of 3.68 with a standard deviation of 0.09. Similarly, the subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour in the control group recorded pre-test mean score of 1.88 with a standard deviation

of 0.09 and a post-test mean score of 1.90 with a standard deviation of 0.09. The table further showed that the subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to PCCS had mean increase of 1.76 while their counterparts in the control group had only 0.02 increase. The mean increase difference between the PCCS group and the control group is 1.74; which implied that the subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) had more increase in mean on their level of counselling-seeking behaviour than their counterparts in the control group.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant mean score difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour between those in PCCS group and control group at posttest period.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on Difference in the Effectiveness of PCCS in Enhancing the Counselling-Seeking Behaviour of In-School Adolescents and the Control at Posttest Period

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	284.759 ^a	4	71.190	21.605	.000
Intercept	7.393	1	7.393	2.245	.010
Pretest	283.682	1	283.682	86.095	.000
Treatment	9.918	1	9.918	3.010	.002
Error	115.325	35	3.295		
Total	66805.000	40			
Corrected Total	400.074	39			

a R squared = .608 (Adjusted R squared = .792).

The results showed that the calculated f-value of 3.010. in respect of the treatment as main effect of Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) on mean rate of counselling-seeking behaviour scores was higher than f-critical of 1.96 with degree of freedom of 4 and 35 at 0.05 level of significance. This implied that exposing subjects with low counselling-seeking behaviour to Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) significantly enhanced their counselling-seeking behaviour. Therefore the null hypothesis of no significant mean score difference in the rate of enhancing of counselling-

seeking behaviour between those in the PCCS group and control at post-test period was rejected. Thus, there was significant mean score difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour between those in PCCS group and control group at posttest period.

Research Question two: What is the mean score difference in the effectiveness of PCCS and control group in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents at posttest period by gender?

Table 3: Pre-test-Post-test Mean and Standard Deviation on the Effectiveness of PCCS in

Enhancing Counselling-Seeking Behaviour of In-School Adolescents at Posttest Period

Source		Pre-test		Post-test		Mean Increase	Mean Increase Diff.
Groups	N	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD		
Males	33	1.92	0.08	3.74	0.11	1.82	0.02
Females	27	1.90	0.09	3.70	0.27	1.80	

Data showed that the male subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour and were exposed to PCCS had a pre-test mean score of 1.92 with a standard deviation of 0.08 and a post-test mean score of 3.74 with a standard deviation of 0.11. Similarly, the female subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour and were exposed to PCCS recorded pre-test mean score of 1.90 with a standard deviation of 0.09 and a post-test mean score of 3.70 with a standard deviation of 0.27. The table further showed that the male subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour and were exposed to PCCS had mean increase difference of 1.82 while their female counterparts with low counselling-seeking behaviour and were exposed to PCCS had 1.80. The mean increase difference between the male and female subjects was 0.02; which implied that the male subjects having low counselling-seeking behaviour and were exposed to PCCS had slightly higher mean counselling-seeking behaviour increase than their female counterparts. The standard deviation of the two groups ranged between 0.08 and 0.27 at post-test; indicating that the respondents were not too far from the mean and from one another in

their responses, adding further validity to the mean. The results therefore, suggested that the use of PCCS had slightly increased the rate of counselling-seeking behaviour of the male in-school adolescents more than their female counterparts at post-test period.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no significant gender difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents among the PCCS and control at posttest period.

Table 4: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the Effectiveness of PCCS in Enhancing Counselling-Seeking Behaviour of In-School Adolescents at Posttest Period by Gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3926.242 ^a	4	981.561	46.399	.000
Intercept	2335.344	1	2335.344	110.392	.000
Post-test	2184.534	1	2184.534	103.263	.001
Gender	31.122	1	31.122	1.471	.341
Error	1163.546	55	21.155		
Total	8477.242	60			
Corrected Total	14953.775	59			

a R squared = .609 (Adjusted R squared = .795).

The results showed no significant gender difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents among the PCCS group at posttest period. The calculated f-value of 1.471 in respect of the gender difference in the treatment main effects of PCCS on mean rate of increase in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents at post-test period is less than f-critical of 1.96 with degree of freedom of 4 and 55 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant gender difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents among the PCCS at posttest period was retained. Thus, there was no significant gender difference in enhancing counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescents among the PCCS at posttest period. This implied that both male and female in-school adolescents with low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to PCCS benefited equally from the treatment.

Discussions of the findings

The findings of this study showed that exposing subjects with low counselling-seeking behaviour to Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) significantly increased their counselling-seeking behaviour level. This is evident from the result that showed that in-school adolescents with low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to PCCS had higher counselling-seeking behaviour than those in the control group at post-test period. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of the study by Makama, et al. (2019) which investigated the effectiveness of psycho-education on psychological wellbeing of adolescents in Jos South LGA of Plateau State. The effectiveness of the treatment using Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) was informed by the active involvement of the subjects in the treatment procedures. The efficacy of Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) in enhancing the counselling-seeking behaviour level of the subjects in this study could be informed by the fact that exposure to psychological condition and available counselling services equips the subjects with the knowledge, recognition, and understanding of psychological conditions and available counselling services for these problems.

The findings of this study for the second research question and hypothesis revealed that both male and female in-school adolescents with low counselling-seeking behaviour exposed to PCCS benefited equally from the treatment. The use of PCCS had slightly increased the rate of counselling-seeking behaviour of the male in-school adolescents more than their female counterparts at post-test period. There was however no significant gender difference in the mean counselling-seeking behaviour of male in-school adolescents exposed to PCCS. The findings of this study agree with earlier findings of Roberts (2023) and Oladipo and Oyenuga (2013). The study by Roberts (2023) examined mental health help-seeking behaviours of first-year University students at a university located in the Southeastern part of the United States. The MANOVA revealed no statistically significant main effects or interactions for gender and race/ethnicity ($p < .05$). The study by Oladipo and Oyenuga (2013) examined locus of control, self-esteem and gender as factors of professional psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates and reported that gender was not a significant predictor of psychological help-seeking among students. The findings of this study are in disagreement with the findings of the study by Haavik, et al. (2017) which investigated the effect of gender and education type on perception of barriers to help seeking, mental health literacy, and the awareness and use of

mental health services. The study reported that compared to males, the females were better in identifying psychological problems of anxiety and trauma, awareness of mental health services and perceived more barriers for seeking help (cost and waiting time).

Conclusions.

Based on the findings, it was concluded that psychological conditions and available counselling services (PCCS) effectively enhanced the level of counselling-seeking behaviour of in-school adolescent in Owerri Municipal, Imo State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the study the following recommendations were made:

1. school counsellors should use psychological conditions with available counselling services in reducing students' low counselling-seeking behaviour to enhance the counselling-seeking behaviour of students that are referred to them.
2. Counsellor education institutions should include in their curriculum those psycho-educational programmes such as Psychological Conditions and Available Counselling Services (PCCS) among others so that counsellors will be familiar with those programmes early enough.

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