

# COUNSELING UTILIZATION BY MINORITY STUDENTS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES: RACE & CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Ngohile Yakubu

Faculty Mentor: Dannielle J. Davis Ph.D.

Saint Louis University

## Abstract

*Although minority college students exhibit higher levels of distress and need for mental counseling, there is little research on such students' utilization and benefits of counseling services (Kearney, Draper & Baron, 2005). College students who sought counseling reported an academic improvement and overall improved lifestyle in general (Bentley, 2018). Through a constant comparative method, the research study tries to investigate if cultural sensitivity and race influence the lack of mental counseling utilization among these racial/ ethnic minority students. As anticipated, cultural sensitivity and race are a contributing factor. The cultural stigma attached to mental counseling is extremely high within these cultures that even those students who choose to seek help attributed their decision to the lack of trust or unfamiliarity to the race of their therapists as those who saw a therapist or counselor of the same race or status as them, reported better outcomes of treatment. Recruiting more minority therapists does not necessarily guarantee the increase in help-seeking among this student population, but as Kim (2006) suggests, having more minority counselors on campus will help reshape the minority perception of counselor and ultimately break that stereotype.*

*Keywords: minority college students, mental health counseling, minority counselors*

## Introduction

Mental health concerns among college students have been identified as a public health issue as it leads to more complications later in life (Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer & Zivin, 2011). In fact, students who utilized mental counseling services reported an overall improvement in their academic performances (Bentley, 2018; Hechinger Report, 2017). Although there has been an increased emphasis on multicultural awareness in counseling in the last decade, little research has examined counseling utilization and outcomes for ethnic/racial minorities on college campuses (Kearney, Draper & Barón, 2005). It is very important to acknowledge that most minority students have underlying issues outside of their academic work, which they may already be struggling with. And most of these issues cannot be resolved without counseling

interventions (Brummit, 1975; Kim, Park, La, Chang, & Zane, 2016). Through a comparison of counseling centers and research studies conducted across different colleges across the United States, the research will identify the different pattern of help-seeking among minority students. The findings from these studies are; ethnic/racial minorities utilize are more likely to open up to counselors who are of the same race as them (Brummit, 1975; Camacho, 2016; Kim, 2006) or those perceived to be culturally sensitive and those they trust. In that case, strategies that are geared towards minorities must be put in place to increase help seeking among such populations

## Literature review

The lack of diversity among counseling staff in the United States is attracting more

students of color into mental health counselor program at the University of Colorado, Denver (Estrada, Garcia, Hipolito- Delgado, 2017). In their research conducted on the experience of students of color from U.S. Western colleges counsellor educator programs, Estrada, Garcia & Hipolito- Delgado (2017) found that, the diversity of faculty (50% at the time) leaders who were people of color prompted a sense of belonging on campus. Other students of color however reported feeling outcast, “marginalized” and socially inept while in class; such experiences left them questioning their academic performances as well. The lack of literature addressing the needs of these students of color indicates a problem that needs to be rectified. And, as the need for more culturally competent minority counselors is increasing, their research recommends for a more diversified staff and proactive mentoring programs to be implemented for students of color enrolled in the program.

Camacho (2016) of South Dakota State University has explored the perception of minority students on mental health. His research identifies key stressors that mostly impact minority students on colleges and how they choose to deal with it. Minority students who feel displaced or discriminated against on their respective campuses also experience a higher level of stress (Camacho, 2016). And even though these group of students may be experiencing a cry for help regarding their mental health, they prefer not to utilize counseling; and for those who do, it is often their last resort Camacho says. He also observed that, among the many barriers that minorities face with help seeking, the biggest is the connection they feel towards their respective counselor. Gallagher & Taylor (2014) as cited by Camacho stated that, white counselors make up 87% of college

counseling staff and with that, minority students are underrepresented due to the lack of diversity.

Bentley’s (2018) research conducted at the University of Plymouth, United Kingdom examined the Sfard’s Acquisition and Participation metaphor (learning takes place in two forms; learning by acquisition or by participation) to show that, counseling help student achieve higher academic performances. The research which was published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy also suggests that, counselling facilitates learning, and isn’t just a medical intervention. Students who were interviewed for the research study attested to the fact that through the guidance of the counsellor, they enhanced their self-identity and expanded their reflective capabilities which ultimately lead to higher academic achievements (Bentley, 2018). Bentley’s study ultimately leads her to believe that counseling can be utilized as an educational strategy rather than a medical intervention to benefit students’ development academically and personally. This very approach can reduce the negative stigma attached.

Brummit (1977) admits that the rate of “attrition” minority students especially African-American Students from disadvantaged backgrounds face is so severe that it cannot be ignored. Brummit- a psychiatrist, was hired to oversee the Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge Program (SEEK)- a program which comprised of mostly blacks, and at the time run by a white male staff- at York University’s Division for Counseling and Development from 1971-1975. During his tenure at York, Brummit worked with students of all races. But based on his evaluation of the SEEK program which catered to minorities and students from

disadvantaged backgrounds, he concluded that, his being black facilitated communication among students who would otherwise not communicate with a white psychiatrist. Brummit went on to conclude that programs like SEEK are the only way minority students especially those from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds can be fully immersed into the American mainstream.

Another group of researchers Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer and Zivin (2011) surveyed students 31,133 students across 26 different colleges to determine mental health counseling utilization rates; putting into perspective the different demographics of the student population (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, residency status etc.). The survey, which yielded a 40% response rate found that, 54.9% “prefer to deal with issues on [their] own.” With some students not realizing the urgency of their condition until it escalates (Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer and Zivin , 2011). A total of 47.3% see stress as being “normal” and therefore see no necessity in seeking help. The study concludes with a suggestion for technology-based approach which could encourage students’ help seeking behavior regarding mental health.

Tugen (2017), in her article by *The Hechinger Report*, addresses issues of racial incidences that occur on predominantly White STEM institutions; leaving minorities students feeling stressed and unsafe. In this article, Tugen (2018) emphasized the need for schools to invest in resources that are beneficial for the needs of minority inclusivity and not just diversity (recruiting counselling staff who are minorities and offering cultural awareness trainings). Miller (2018) also suggests that based on evidence, minority students exhibit a greater demand for mental services than any other group.

The availability of counseling services will help minorities cope with stressors and also increase their graduation rates as well (Miller, 2018). So, the question is, how do we get them to utilize these services For a possible solution, Kim (2006) in her article by the American Counseling Association (ACA) Journal emphasizes that, trained minority counselors will serve as “cultural brokers” between minority clients and non-minority counselors. Kim thinks minority counselors will serve as role models to minorities who are negligent in seeking mental help. And as a result, groups who have a negative connotation regarding mental counseling will benefit from testimonials of ethnic minority counselors who are of the same race. Ethnic minorities will also encourage more minorities to consider becoming counselors as well.

Often, universities have information regarding counseling services on their websites. For example, Creighton university counseling center acknowledges that “our ethnicity, racial and cultural backgrounds greatly influence our view of the world, our attitude and our behavior” in support of their recognition for diversity. They are also aware that minority students often have external stressors; family issues, racism and prejudice, self-esteem, classism, loneliness etc. aside from school stress that can toll with their mental health. But, they aren’t very specific as to what resources are channeled toward counseling minority students who may be experiencing such problems. And with such little information, students are not interested in help seeking or sometimes go outside of campus services.

Mental health awareness continues to spread across colleges campuses. But for minority students, there are several challenges and barriers that can hinder their ability to receive the appropriate care (Clarey, 2017).

One reason according to Dr. Ludmila de Faria (as cited by Clarey, 2017) is that historically, “people of color” generally underutilize counseling due to the stigma attached. Regardless, through shared experiences from those who have derived benefits from counseling, the supposed stigma will eventually come loose. A psychology professor at the University of Minnesota Richard Lee (as cited by Clarey, 2017), suggested that the system is flawed and does not favor minority mental needs. In his studies on minorities, Lee says, a threat to one’s culture ultimately impacts them in a negative way. Incidences of racism, prejudice and discrimination that is experience by these group of individuals therefore affects their mental wellbeing. The article concludes with some proposed approaches to improve mental health accessibility for minorities at the University of Minnesota.

To improve counseling utilization among the minority student population, schools such as Donnelly University- where minority students are the majority, a different approach called “Text, Talk, Act” was used to engage students in a round conversation regarding mental health. Nearly all students who participated said they were “less likely to utilize mental health services.” In the same article, 64 % of college drop-outs listing “stigma” as the reason for not seeking mental health counseling, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) statistics (Lechliter, 2017).

### **Significance of study**

In 1997, Gibbs conducted a research for three academic years at a Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), to determine mental health utilization by black students. During his research he found that, fewer black students utilized the counselling clinic

compared to their white peers. The study which spanned from 1969-1972 academic years was intended to gather data on the intake of black students at the Cowell Health Center at Stanford University, the problems they presented and to evaluate the effectiveness of their therapeutic treatment approach. Gibbs learned that, black students stayed in therapy longer if they had a black therapist compared to a white one. Over the course of those 3 years, Gibbs (1997) also saw a decline in the number of black students’ utilization of mental health to which she assumed, was due to the increased black students’ enrollment or the expansion of services aimed at black students’ mental health needs. In her conclusion, Gibbs suggests confronting racial differences at first encounter between both client and therapist is key, to successful outcomes.

Tugen (2017) in her article for the *Hechinger Report* states “the polarized political climate is exacerbating;” keeping non-white students away from counseling services. The issue of not seeking mental help not only resides among black students but also Asian Americans Tugen (2017) proceeds. After witnessing the lack of diversity among therapists at Harvard, Karla Mendoza – who is Mexican American- and some of her fellow classmates, requested that nonwhite therapist be hired. Minority students have culturally unique stressors that can interfere with their mental health, but often they shy away from seeking help (Brown, 2016). In 2014, a black Harvard student name Stephen committed suicide.

For other students, the decision to seek counseling isn’t just dependent on race of the therapist but on the perception of biases and the lack of mutual interest between their view and those of the counselor (Leong, Wagner, & Tata, 1995 as cited by Constantine, Chen & Ceesay). Breland-

Noble (as cited by Tugen, 2017) admits minority students “who walk into a clinic and don’t see anyone who looks like them except the cleaning staff or the person at the front desk, they’re going to walk right out.” Mary-Ann Covey who is a psychologist and director of student counseling at Texas A&M University shared her experience with an African American student, who once told her that, “African- American people don’t trust white people in counseling.” This shows that, students who’ve already established trust issues with the counseling staff will not seek help even when they need it the most.

While many seem to think cultural diversity trainings and awareness programs are a great solution, Kim (2006) recommends hiring trained minority counselors to serve as “cultural brokers” between minority clients and non-minority counselors. In Kim’s perspective, minority counselors will serve as role models to minority students who are negligent in seeking mental help, especially those from cultural backgrounds where seeking mental health counseling is frowned upon. With ethnic minority counselors in the lead, cultures that hold a negative connotation towards mental counseling will benefit from a psychoeducation from a counselor of the same race; ultimately urging them to seek needed help without hesitation.

### **Methods**

The research data was gathered and analyzed through a Constant Comparative approach. Constant comparative method as the name implies is simply collecting data regarding a topic of concern and comparing them to identify any themes as they emerge. After close comparison of sources, data can then be categorized based on different criteria to yield a finding. In this research, various scholarly reviewed articles and

research papers were gathered from Google Scholar, school websites, news publications, and PubMed. During analysis, I was able to identify similar patterns among research works and the findings of other researchers.

### **Findings**

Minority students in general often choose not to utilize counseling services for many reasons. As I constantly compared various literature throughout this research, different themes began to emerge; ultimately leading me to believe that utilization rates are dependent on so many variables. One of the reasons is the racial or cultural stigma associated with help seeking. In some cultures, particularly the Asian or Black/African culture, help seeking is viewed as a sign of weakness, shame to the family or not of any significance. Often, issues regarding mental health are considered private and should therefore be addressed within the family. For others, religious institutions or external resources are an option as well.

Counseling, however, benefits students academically as it increases graduation rates and improves their future quality of life. Students who sought counseling admitted to benefiting greatly from it both academically and personally. Mental health issues develop early on in life and without proper care, they lead to significant psychological problems that require medical treatments (Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer & Zivin, 2011). Students who excel academically will have a potentially better future and quality of life which adds to societal values (Brummit, 1975).

With the help of APA guidelines, multicultural counseling and diversity trainings have proven beneficial in counseling these population of students. To leverage better outcomes, having cultural competency along with counselors who are minorities themselves will be key to

dislodging that stigma that cultures have about counseling or help-seeking (Kim, 2006). So, someone who is culturally competent by experience is more sensitive than someone who has been trained to be culturally competent or aware. The initiative can be achieved through the recruitment and retention of minority students in the counseling professions, providing support for them to attain professional trainings to which will enable them to serve as role models and maybe eventually, change the perception of ethnic /racial minorities towards counseling in general.

### **Limitation of the study**

The limitation that were encountered during this study were those due to time constraint on data collection. the research time was short and data collection was based on secondary data source which were obtained through scholarly websites such as PubMed and university websites. No primary data was collected because the IRB process could not be obtained within such a short period of time. In the future, collecting primary data from the minority student population and narrowing it down to local schools will yield better results. Another limitation to the study is that, the data was collected on a broad scale and may not be generalizable to the entire population, but the research can be a used for future research to examine mental counseling interventions for minority students on college campuses.

### **Implications of the study**

The study has been able to explore so many reasons why minority students choose to stay away from seeking mental counseling in times of need. An emerging team which observed throughout the study was that, more students rely on the support they get and receive from family and peers about the importance of seeking help. Even among emotionally and mentally sound individuals,

the need to consult about someone regarding mental health is emphasized. And as a minority, sometimes attending a college with fewer minorities, the challenge to keep up and fit in can take a mental toll on students. In such cases, with little or no support, students feel the need to request help somewhere else or try to handle things for themselves, and sometimes not in the best way possible. Therefore, it is in the students' best interest if colleges pay close attention to such students; closely identifying their needs, monitoring and checking for any red flags that may be difficult to notice in general counseling.

There are also organizations out there who are willing to establish partnerships with colleges and universities who are willing to implement programs that are geared towards the mental health and support of minority students. One of them is the JED foundation and another is the Steve fund. These organizations support colleges are making the effort to promote mental awareness among the minority population. Minority students exhibit different levels of stress and mental exhaustions caused by different culminating factors. Helping such students cope with these stresses will eliminate the mental toll that stress puts on them; increase their performance and improve their overall quality of life as well.

Some of the strategies that have this study recommend are the application of the *Sfard's participation and acquisition theory* (Bentley, 2018). The second program is known NITEO program and it is a program currently in use at Boston university. The third strategy will be training more minorities to become mental counselors and role models (Kim, 2006) in the field of mental counseling and assistance. Having minorities in such roles would be beneficial as Kim (2006) suggests and would help

bridge the gap between race and the cultural sensitivity that may arise during counseling. The fourth approach will be tackling mental counseling as in an educational vs medical intervention. This means that, instead of having a standardized counseling center, mental counseling can be incorporated in everyday learning within the classroom. This will help facilitate discussions that's students may otherwise not feel the need to share or address in a one-on-one session.

## References

Bentley, A. (2018). 'I was just like, Wow!': Student perception of how counselling benefitted their academic experience. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 18*(2), 215-219. doi:10.1002/capr.12149

Brummit, H. (1977). Impressions of a black psychiatrist in a college dealing with black and other minority students. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 37*(1), 13-21. doi:10.1007/bf01252819

Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). Constant Comparative Method – Grounded Theory. Retrieved July 3, 2018, from <http://www.qualres.org/HomeCons-3824.html>

Camacho, E. (2016). Minority Student Perceptions of Mental Health. Retrieved June 15, 2018, from [https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol14/iss1/6/?utm\\_source=openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol14/iss1/6&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol14/iss1/6/?utm_source=openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol14/iss1/6&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages)

Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado, Diane Estrada & Marina Garcia (2017). Diversifying counsellor education: a case study of U.S. students of colour, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 45*:5, 473-488, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2017.1379597

Clarey, D. (2017, January 30). Report tackles mental health disparities for UMN minority communities. Retrieved June 29, 2018, from <http://www.mndaily.com/article/2017/01/mental-health-minorities-college>

Constantine, M. G., Chen, E. C., & Ceesay, P. (1997). Intake Concerns of Racial and Ethnic Minority Students at a University Counseling Center: Implications for Developmental Programming and Outreach. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 25*(3), 210-218. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.1997.tb00331.x

Eisenberg, D., Hunt, J., Speer, N., & Zivin, K. (2011). Mental Health Service Utilization Among College Students in the United States. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 199*(5), 301-308. doi:10.1097/nmd.0b013e3182175123 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.11.3.272>

Gibbs, J. T. (1975). Use of mental health services by Black students at a predominantly White university: A three-year study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 45*(3), 430-445. doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.1975.tb02554.x

Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Bradley, C. (2003). Recruitment and Retention of Ethnic Minority Counselor Educators: An Exploratory Study of CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 42*(3), 231-243. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2003.tb01814.x

Kearney, L. K., Draper, M., & Barón, A. (2005). Counseling Utilization by Ethnic Minority College Students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 11*(3), 272-285.

Lastly, the use of technology (Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer & Zivin, 2011) to target the minority student audiences. Today's generation is very technologically driven and motivated. Using social media platforms and other media outlets such as testimonials and videos from fellow students will help break the barriers for those who are hesitant in seeking help.

Kim, J. M. (2006). VISTAS Multicultural Issues in Counseling. Retrieved June 22, 2018, from <https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas/by-subject2/vistas-multicultural-issues/docs/default-source/vistas/ethnic-minority-counselors-as-cultural-brokers-using-the-self-as-an-instrument-to-bridge-the-gap>

Lechliter, S. (2017, May 03). Donnelly College works with minority students to reduce mental health stigma. Retrieved June 29, 2018, from <https://hcfqkc.org/donnelly-college-works-minority-students-reduce-mental-health-stigma/>

The Hechinger Report. (2017, August 31). Nonwhite Students Slow to Seek Mental Health Counseling. Retrieved June 22, 2018, from <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-08-31/nonwhite-students-slow-to-seek-mental-health-counseling-for-which-theyre-more-in-need>

The Hechinger Report. (2018, January 23). STEM Students Want Universities to Address Racial Issues. Retrieved June 22, 2018, from <https://www.usnews.com/news/stem-solutions/articles/2018-01-23/to-attract-more-blacks-and-hispanics-to-stem-universities-must-address-racial-issues-experts-say>

Meyer, O. L., & Zane, N. (2013). The Influence of Race and Ethnicity In Clients' Experiences Of Mental Health Treatment. *Journal of Community Psychology, 41*(7), 884-901. <http://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21580>

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (Second ed.). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Smith, K. M., Chesin, M. S., & Jeglic, E. L. (2014). Minority College Student Mental Health: Does Majority Status Matter? Implications for College Counseling Services. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 42*(2), 77-92. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2014.00046.x