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## Attitudes towards Seeking Counseling among Midlands State University Students

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### **Abstract:**

*Despite, changes in culture due to globalization and world trade, Counseling still remains a foreign phenomenon amongst many students in Zimbabwe. Students at the Midlands State University were observed to be suffering from a lot of social, economic and psychological distress which lead to some of them resorting to prostitution, suicide and dropping out of university amongst other coping strategies. This was due to lack of proper guidance due to the fact that they fear to make use of the services that the university has availed for them as a result of factors like culture, stereotype and failure to understand the counseling process. 27 students were purposively selected and interviewed and the results were thematically presenting, with evidence suggesting that the counseling services are provided at the institute however misconceptions about the services make the students not to seek counseling even when in despair.*

### **1. Introduction**

Professional counseling in the African context is usually viewed as foreign. Therefore people faced with challenges would rather resort to their uncles and aunts for advice rather than visiting a psychologist or counselor. The 21<sup>st</sup> century coupled with the globalizing world has brought about tremendous stresses, tensions and depression amongst the youth as they compete and fail to cope with the quick evolving trends of the time. Apart from the stress of the global world, schooling can be a source of dire stress from which some may need counseling to cope with. As a tertiary institution, Midlands State University (M.S.U) enrolls students from different ethnic and financial backgrounds. These differences can be a cause of stress where some students fail to fit in because of their background hence slipping into a depression and the worst case scenario some attempting suicide. The absence of a close family member coupled with the socialization that problems are not to be shared with strangers at university means that the student has to bear their stresses alone. In the past semester alone, M.S.U had quite a number of suicidal attempts amongst the student body. Psychiatric-like conditions were also reported, while evidence of stress could be overtly observed in some students. Some of these stressors lead students to drop out of University, miss lectures, performance drop as well as turn to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism.

The M.S.U administration saw the plight of the students and thus established a counseling department that is furnished with professional counselors. To further emphasize the importance of student wellbeing, a Wellness and Wellbeing clinic was also established under the department of Psychology, which is run by registered psychologists lecturing in the department. Despite the efforts by the admin to foster a healthy environment both psychologically and physically, through the provision of counseling services and professional help. M.S.U students continue to attempt suicide and suffer from other related stresses with severe consequences. This poses a question: 'Is the M.S.U counseling services department effective at all?'

The students are familiarize of the existence of the counseling department during their 1<sup>st</sup> year orientation. The counseling services department adopts a clinical model in its operations whereby they wait for those with problems to come seek services. The question now becomes: "If students are aware of the existence of a counseling service, why then don't they seek the services of a counselor when in distress?" A logical answer would entail the various attitudes held by the students towards seeking counseling hence this study seeks to unmask those attitudes amongst M.S.U students. Counseling services offered at universities are viewed as, "a myriad of developmental services that make counseling and counseling related services available and accessible to students within the context of a specific environment" (Dean & Meadows, 1995). Regrettably, many students suffering from emotional difficulties cease from seeking professional counseling services on campus help with potentially far-reaching implications for long-term mental health and adult functioning (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). It has been documented that only a few of university students who experience psychological distress seek professional counseling (Kahn and Williams 2003).

Additionally, students prefer to seek psychological help in the case of serious mental illness rather than in the cases of developmental, vocational or social problems (Turner & Quinn, 1999). This is despite the fact that most universities in the country conduct counseling

services to students on campus free of charge. At M.S.U the counseling centers are situated within the university and counselors are also found at the university clinic and various staff members like lectures, the chaplain and dean of students offer counseling services. According to DeStefano, Mellott & Petersen (2001) counseled students are more socially, and emotionally adjusted. Sharkin (2004) went on to say that students who receive counseling are more likely to stay at school. Rickinson (1998) postulated that counseled students are also likely to more successfully complete their degree programs.

## 2. Problems Faced by University Students

Generally students encounter various levels of stress due to educational, personal, relationship and financial anxieties as a result of these stressors being a university student may be difficult to balance. Whereas others may deal with the stressful conditions others are easily weighed down with the pressures of academics and social life. If personal problems are piled on top of these pressures students often feel overwhelmed and lose balance. Counseling is therefore essential because psychological well-being and mental health is very important for the student's success. A study done by Kasayira, Chipandambira and Hungwe (2007) on Stressors Faced by University Students at Midlands state university and their Coping Strategies reviewed seven major stressors faced by students which included the problem of finance, resources from the library and academic material, accommodation, food, transport, inadequate infrastructure and lecturer related problems.

University students encounter different types of problems including but not limited to the following, adjustment issues, concerns about career choices or academic performances, family concerns such as parental divorce, alcoholism pressure from the family, emotional difficulties such as anxiety and depression, roommate conflicts, eating disorders, problem with alcohol and substance abuse can lead to a student losing self-control, suicidal feelings, isolation and discrimination. Students also get overwhelmed with major life events such as death of a loved one, disappointments in romantic relationships, these major life transitions can cause university students to feel unloved, depressed, isolated and lonely. Unbearable pain caused by medical conditions, failure to live to one's own or others expectations may lead to feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and helplessness or being a failure. University students also face financial pressures, unplanned pregnancy, identity crisis, cultural oppression and some may still be haunted by recent or past sexual or physical assault. In other students extreme perfectionism can result in psychological effects such as anxiety, hopelessness and depression. In other words these problems results in poor academic performance.

## 3. Perceptions towards Counseling

Numerous studies have suggested that counseling services are not favored as a source of help by students (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Lin, 2001; Rudowicz & Au, 2001; Setiawan, 2004). Numerous studies have been conducted to identify factors that influence the decision to utilize counseling services among students. According to Fischer, Winer and Abramowitz (1983), there are three broad categories of factors influencing individuals to seek psychological help or not. The categories identified by Fischer, Winer and Abramowitz (1983) are personal, socio-cultural, and agency factors. Personal factors include things relating to personal characteristics and situations. Socio-cultural factors refer to cultural values or certain social group's characteristics. Factors relating to counseling services, such as the service, counselors, or other administrative issues, are grouped into agency factors.

Furthermore, Surf and Lynch (1999) showed in their study among young people from the UK that the sense of powerlessness in relation to difficulties prevented individuals from seeking counseling. The study also showed that adopting denial as a coping style also prevented individuals from seeking counseling. This result is also supported by a study conducted by Seiffge-Krenke (1989).

Jenny Lukito Setiawan (2006) study to investigate the relationships between perceptions relevant to counseling and willingness to seek counseling of students who came from an urban area in Indonesia indicated that those who were potentially highly likely and those who were less likely to seek counseling showed significant differences in most of the areas of perceptions of counseling. In general, the potential high seekers had better perceptions of counseling than the potential low seekers. The study suggests that those with more positive attitudes are the ones most likely to utilize counseling services. While this research have shown a link between perceptions and willingness to seek counseling services it is still essential to conduct the research that fully examine the link in the Zimbabwean context due to different cultural norms and values.

In a study involving 4,699 first year university students at a British university constituting 84% of first year students, it was reported that 3% had used the university counseling service by the end of the second semester (Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley & Audin, 2006). In the same study, only 5% of students categorized as 'vulnerable' on the basis of their psychological wellbeing scores had accessed university counseling, with the majority indicating that they had not used alternative services (Cooke et. al.2006). Similar overall rates of the use of counseling services of between 2% and 4% have been reported in America (Yoo and Skovholt 2001), South Africa (Flisher, De Beer, & Bokhorst 2002.), and Indonesian (Setiawan 2006) university student samples.

Gender differences have been reported to influence the utilization of counseling services by students. Flisher et. al. (2002) postulates that, females are reported to utilize counseling services more than their male counterparts. The influence of gender in the willingness to utilize counseling services indicates cultural influences, and cannot be instantaneously generalized worldwide.

Furthermore, the allegedly higher counseling service utilization rates of female students may be imprecise in some studies due to failure to take into consideration the fact that females outnumber males in many populations and on many university campuses. In a study done at the Spanish university, it was reported that females were 10% more likely to utilize counseling services than males, however there was no significant differences due to gender remained when those students receiving counseling were compared with the general university population (Arco, Fernandez, Heilborn & Lopez 2005).

Further studies indicated a trend of somaticizing psychological problems as an explanation for student's underutilization of counseling services. Students from cultures with negative attitudes towards counseling, particularly Asian students, are often said to interpret

psychological distress, such as depression, in terms of physical symptoms like sleep disturbance that require medical treatment, a more acceptable form of professional help (Braun and Browne 1998). The willingness of students to utilize counseling services can be attributed to different cultural terms. Non-western beliefs are said to stigmatize use of counseling services, particularly in Asian (Carr, Koyama & Thiagarajan 2003)

A study done by Raviv, Vago-Gefen and Schachter Fink (2008) on the personal service gap, factors affecting adolescent's willingness to seek help, explored Israeli's adolescents' attitudes towards seeking help for emotional problems. The results indicated that adolescents refer peers more than themselves to a psychologist and to a friend, they are more willing to refer themselves and peers to a friend rather than to a psychologist. Daston- Blake, Knox and Holman (2007) explored on the perceptions of college students concerning their attitudes towards marriage, family and sex therapy and willingness to engage in counseling relevant to relationship concerns. The findings revealed that in the area of couple counseling female and European American participants were most likely to indicate a willingness to engage in couples counseling. Pheko, Chilisa, Balogun and Kgathi (2013) found that students at University of Botswana have a moderate if not low intention to seek psychological help. The study revealed that only attitudes towards seeking psychological help and social stigma of receiving psychological help predicted intentions to seek psychological help.

#### **4. Aim of the Study**

The aim of the current study was to explore attitudes held by students that make them not to seek professional counseling despite the availability of the services at M.S.U. It sought to find the student's views towards how their counseling should be done. It sought to answer the following questions: What is the student's problem with the university counseling services? Findings might be useful in informing interventions for students. Study findings might assist M.S.U counselors in increasing awareness among students about health seeking behavior.

#### **5. Method**

##### *5.1. Research Design*

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. It is a subjective approach employed to explain life as it is experienced and to give meanings to the experiences. A qualitative research provides individual's own accounts of their behaviors, perceptions, beliefs, views, feelings and attitudes. The researcher adopted this method because it is useful in defining student's attitudes towards counseling.

##### *5.2. Participants and Setting*

Study participants were 27 drawn using purposive sampling. These had visited the counseling service and had been faced with some form a stressor.

##### *5.3. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis*

In-depth interviews were carried out to ascertain the attitudes held by students. Each interview took between 20 to 30 minutes and all interviews were recorded then transcribed verbatim. Permission for the study was sought from the Academic registrar and dean of students. Each participant signed a consent form to acknowledge the consent in participating. Before the study began, participants were debriefed on what the research was about. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable continuing. Content analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Themes were drawn and a coding system was used to assign the texts agreed upon to the relevant texts.

##### *5.4. Results*

27 interviews were carried out on students who had sought counseling services at M.S.U. of the 27, 6 were males and 21 were females, with their ages ranging between 19 and 24. Code numbers 1 to 27 were assigned to the participants to ensure confidentiality. Findings showed that students had knowledge of the existence of the counseling services offered at the university but were not eager to utilize them due to fear of being stigmatized, concerns on privacy and fear of publicizing the self.

##### *5.5. Concerns about Privacy*

Students felt that there was lack of professionalism among the counseling staff and thus privacy could not be maintained. Their belief was that they would be talked of all over campus and this is shown through utterances such as:

- Participant 15,21, 25 and 27  
→ "I don't feel at ease discussing my problem with a counselor he or she is also human she is bound to breach the confidentiality and the next thing is you will hear the whole campus discussing about you".
- Participant 11 said:  
→ "Those people discuss your problems with other counselors or staff members nothing is confidential about seeking counseling".

The results indicated that students fear the breach of confidentiality, they don't like their problems to be known by other people and for that reason, and they would rather not seek professional help from the counseling services on campus

### 5.6. Viewing a Counselor as a Stranger

Participants viewed the counselor as a stranger and it was contrary to their culture which socializes them into trusting those of their kin only. For example:

- Participant 1 said:  
→ “Though the counselor is trained and experienced in the field of counseling, I don’t see myself seeking help from a total stranger, I need someone who really knows and understands me better not some total stranger she has got nothing to say concerning my life.”
- Participant 15 said:  
→ “As for me I won’t go and consult a counselor for my problems I don’t usually open up to someone I rarely know. I don’t feel at ease discussing my private life with a total stranger he might think am crazy to come with such a problem to counseling services”.

This suggests that students are more at ease sharing personal information with very close people such as family and friends rather than with counselors who are total strangers.

### 5.7. Stigmatization

Students felt that they would be labelled as weak if they visited the counseling services. This was a common response in the male students who believe that talking to someone is a sign of weakness and thus contrary to the notion of masculinity in males. For example:

- Participant 16 said:  
→ “When I visited the counselor, my friends laughed at me saying counseling was for the weak, inferior and not sure of themselves, they said if I can’t trust myself to make my own decisions how could I trust someone else to make decisions for me”.
- Participant 13 said:  
→ “If I decide to utilize counseling services I will not let anyone know, I will go there privately. I think if I get to tell somebody he or she might think I am mentally disturbed”.
- Participant 9 said:  
→ “Counseling is only for people who are dependent and cannot handle their emotions those who have serious mental illness”.

This suggests that attitudes towards counseling services are greatly influenced by peers and the social environment that one is in.

### 5.8. Fear of self-disclosure

Students indicated that they fear to divulge all their personal information to a counselor. This is evident in the following statement:

- “I only feel like sharing only a part of the problem with the counselor, maybe with time when we get acquainted that’s when I’ll disclose all the information”.

Another student was even quoted saying:

- “Some information is too confidential to be shared with just anyone. Problems are only shared with trustful people”.

The students believed that their problems are too personal to be shared and thus they did not want to publicize themselves to strangers.

### 5.9. Counseling is an option

It was also observed that students would evaluate their problem and if they felt it was too deep and severe to be dealt with personally they would first seek help from their friends and family before even thinking of the counselors. Counseling services were therefore always a last option as they felt it was too alien a service to the Africans especially Zimbabweans. For example

- Participant 2 said:  
→ “I will think of utilizing counseling services only when I am faced with very challenging problems and when I have exhausted all other means of coping”.
- Participant 7 said:  
→ “I will first try to solve the problem on my own and ask for the help and support of my family and friends. When they prove to be helpless that’s when I will seek counseling services”.
- Participant 27 said:  
→ “I will only seek counseling services when the problem appears to worsen and when the problem starts to disturb me day in day out. Like when the problem starts to give me sleepless nights”

This suggests that counseling is yet to be regarded in high esteem especially among students since they view it as an option and never their first choice of action.

## 6. Discussion

The negative attitudes portrayed by the student are in line with Pheko, Chilisa, Balogun and Kgathi (2013) who assert that students fear visiting counseling services because of the stigma attached to visiting such service. The students believed that their problems are too personal to be shared with a stranger and the counselor cannot help but it is within the person to solve the problems. Moreover they reported to rely on family and friends. This concurs with Gibbons and Gerrard (1995) who presume that the willingness of young

people to engage in a behavior is said to be affected by the social images they associate with that behavior. Young people are cognizant of the attributions others give to their behaviors especially peers and significant others which are the social images. Students are affected by what their peers say about them and therefore that on its own influences their health seeking behavior. Furthermore, it was noted that students evaluate the severity of their problem and attempt to solve it on their own. Failure to do so they enlist the services of those close to them. It is only when they feel they have exhausted all solutions that they can consider visiting the counseling service department. Another factor which influenced the attitudes in students is the ideals, values and beliefs endowed in children through socialization. African culture believes that crying and talking about your problems especially in males is a sign of weakness and for that reason, students would rather not visit the counseling services. This is in line with the theory of planned behavior where one considers the benefits and consequences of a behavior and if they feel that visiting a counseling service will make them a social outcast, then they would rather not at all.

Limitations of the study include the small sample size and thus caution should be taken in generalizing the results to students at M.S.U and other universities. Despite the limitation, existing literature that was used, helped put the findings into context.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings revealed that M.S.U students had negative attitudes towards counseling. Based on the finding, their fears were mostly about what others would say and not about the service itself. They feared being labelled as weak for seeking help, they feared publicizing themselves and lack of privacy. One can safely conclude that student's attitudes are based on the fear of the unknown and not the service or the professionals in the department.

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