

# INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL FACTORS ON COUNSELLING SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN TANZANIA. A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DODOMA

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the influence of social factors on counselling seeking behaviour of students at the higher learning institutions by drawing examples from the University of Dodoma. It employed a descriptive research design using a qualitative research approach. A total of 99 respondents including 20 counsellors and 79 third year university students were involved. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used in selecting respondents for this study. Interview and focus group discussions were used to obtain data from students and counsellors. Data were analysed thematically to generate themes and sub-themes. Furthermore, the study found that students' social factors such as prior help seeking experience, gender, age and family background may either negatively or positively influence the seeking behaviour of counselling services at the university. The study recommends that the University management and the government should cooperate to ensure effective counselling services are provided to students through having many counsellors, counselling units and educating students to seek counselling services available at the university.

**Keywords:** counselling seeking behaviour, higher learning institutions, counselling services, counselling units.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Counselling service among students in higher education is very important and perhaps urgently needed due to its perceived implications in the university's life. In the university system, the aim of both teaching and counselling is to prepare and guide students into a better future. Lack of an effective counselling service may lead to wrong career path decisions, lack of interest in choosing a field, emotional depression and lack of focus in life (Fox & Butler, 2017).

Despite the importance of counselling in higher learning, social problems among the students were observed in institutions that lack mental health services (Ahmad, *et al.*, 2017). It was reported by (Guneri, 2016) that one third of students in higher education failed to learn because of social problems that impaired their ability to attend and engage fully in instructional activities. This implies that students' social problems constitute a topic of interest around the world. Furthermore Guneri, (2016) revealed that, university counselling services are underutilised by the students. Social issues such as peer influence, students' prior help seeking experience, students' gender, as well as students' family background have a profound impact on counselling seeking behaviour of student's effectiveness and successful outcome of the counselling services.

In Tanzania, students in higher learning institutions find it very challenging to adjust to social and academic life in their campuses due to the increase of the complexities in today's world which is influenced by digital life (Moshia, 2019). These complexities cause students to face various problems that call for intensive counselling services in these institutions to help them learn comfortably and successfully in their studies. Even though provision of counselling services has been legalised by government of Tanzania through the policy of Education and Vocational Training of 1984 (URT, 2017; 2019), the rate of students seeking for these service remains low (Biswalo, 2017, Ochola, 2018; Kano, 2020; Sima 2017 and Aroko, 2021). This study intends to investigate the influence of different social factors on counselling seeking behaviour in high learning institutions.

### Statement of the Problem

The University of Dodoma established the counselling programs from its inception but with its 34,000 plus students, but less than 100 seek counselling services in a year (Counselling and Guidance Office Data, UDOM 2022).

Similarly, many studies in counselling in higher learning institutions have largely focused on other factors. For instance, Sima, (2017) studied significance of counselling services in higher learning institutions; Eyo et al, (2018) focused on psychological factors affecting students' performance; Biswalo (2017) studied the need for psychological intervention in urban secondary schools; Ochola (2018) studied counselling needs disparities for girls and boys in secondary schools; Kano (2020) focused on the effectiveness of psychological interventions in higher learning institutions; and Aroko (2021) studying the need for a counsellor in universities. In that case, little studies have been focused on how social factors influence the counselling seeking behaviour among students in higher learning institutions which this study aims to establish.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Review

This study is framed by a Behavioural Model of Health Service Use. This model provides insight into understanding reasons for the counselling help-seeking of university students and their need for help. According to Andersen (2019), enhancing counselling help-seeking behaviour can only be achieved by paying attention to both individual and contextual factors in which case study considers social factors. Here, contextual factors relate to conditions and environment in which and through which the help-seeking occurs. The model assumes that there are three significant factors that facilitate or impede help-seeking namely, predisposing factors, enabling factors and need factors. These factors are believed to be situated within the individual as well as the environment.

### Empirical Review

University counselling services exist primarily to facilitate the success and development of university students and this function remains important as university students face increasing pressures and difficulties that could interfere with attainment of their educational and career goals (Gallagher, 2018; Pledge, Lapan, Heppner, Kivlighan, & Roehlke, 2013; Turner & Berry, 2019). Unfortunately, despite the range of services available at university counselling centres, a relatively small percentage of students utilize them when experiencing difficulties (Deane & Chamberlain, 2019). A variety of explanations have been offered to explain the under-utilization of counselling services by university students, including the finding that university students prefer to talk about difficulties with family and friends rather than with counsellors (Oliver et al., 2019).

Two significant studies have integrated the results of previous studies to identify four main variables related to students' intentions to seek counselling. In the first study, Kelly and Achter, (2017) focused on the relationship between self-concealment and students' intentions to seek counselling. Self-concealment is defined as a personality trait that is "a predisposition to actively conceal from others personal information that one perceives as distressing or negative" (Larson & Chastain, (2016). Kelly and Achter, (2017) found that higher self-concealers were more likely to indicate that they would seek counselling, despite having fewer positive attitudes towards counselling. Social support and a measure of psychological distress (depression) were not significantly related to intentions to seek counselling.

The second study (Cepeda-Benito & Short, 2018) reported different findings using a study design and variables similar to those used by Kelly and Achter, (2017). In contrast to Kelly and Achter, Cepeda-Benito and Short found that higher levels of psychological distress, lower levels of social support, and positive attitudes towards counselling significantly predicted

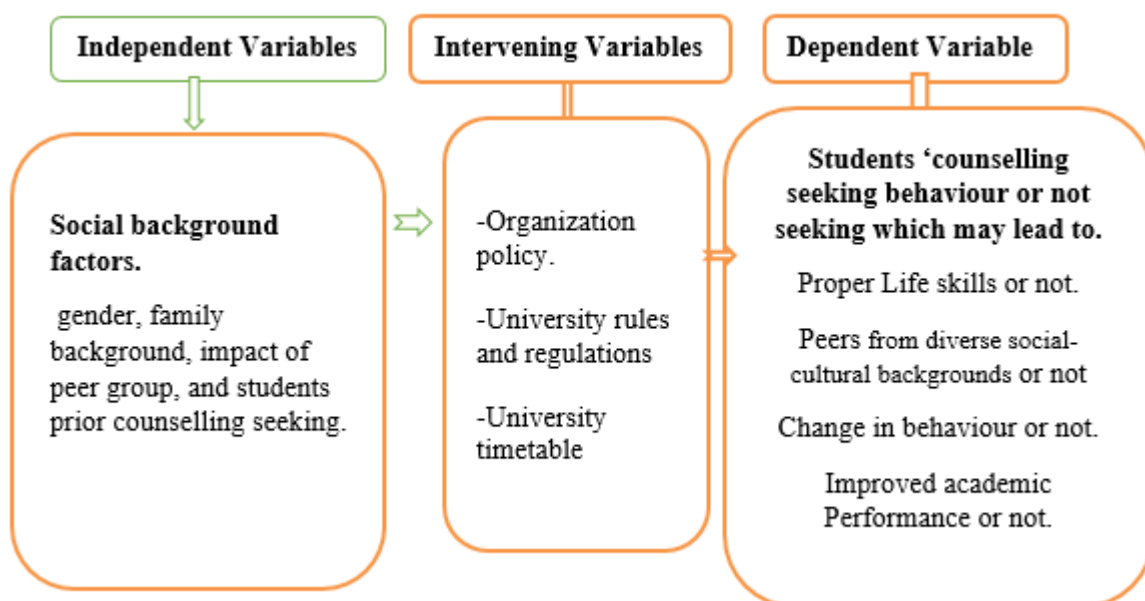
a greater intention to seek counselling. As well, the interaction between social support and self-concealment significantly predicted intentions to seek counselling, though self-concealment alone was not a significant predictor.

One reason for the different results between these studies may be related to the inclusion of a wider variety of students' presenting issues in the Cepeda-Benito and Short study. Specifically, higher levels of self-concealment were related to lower social support, higher distress levels, and less positive attitudes towards counselling. Studies have also reported differences in help-seeking attitudes and behaviours by racial background. For example, Asian students have been found to have fewer positive attitudes about seeking counselling than do Caucasian students (Sue, 2019), though higher levels of acculturation for Asian students are related to more positive attitudes towards counselling (Atkinson & Gim, 2018; Tata & Leong, 2016).

Also, Asian students have a greater preference to seek "informal" helping resources such as family and friends (Suan & Tyler, 2017) and a tendency to be less likely to perceive their difficulties as sufficiently serious to warrant professional assistance than their Caucasian peers (Mau & Jepson, 2014). Finally, in community samples, Asian participants indicated that they preferred to seek assistance from a counsellor with the same racial background as theirs (Akutsu, Snowden, & Organista, 2015).

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual framework guides the researcher towards the clarification of the research questions and objectives from the beginning point of the study. Regarding this study, the conceptual framework model shows a set of relationships between the independent variables, and the dependent variable. Based on the Behavioural Model of Health Service for the case of this study on students' social factors influencing counselling seeking in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, the model helped the researcher to integrate the research variables namely as students' social factors and counselling seeking, hence show how they relate to one another in supporting students to seek or not to seek for counselling services.



Source: Designed by the researcher

**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework**

**III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study used a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2009) asserts that the qualitative approach allows the researcher to enter the respondents' personal world to gain deeper and clear understanding of their knowledge, experience and feelings.

The descriptive survey design was used in this study to address the research questions on the influence of students' socio-cultural background towards counselling seeking behaviour of student's services in higher learning institutions. Descriptive survey involves a small inclusive and intensive study of individuals whereby an investigator employs his/her skills and methods to allow systematic gathering of enough information about a phenomenon to permit one is understanding on how it functions as a unit of society

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The study involved 99 respondents, 79 students and 20 counsellors. Therefore, sample size was distributed according to the estimated population. The informants were Counsellors and Students. The students were involved in the study because they are beneficiaries of the services provided.

This study adopted a simple random and purposive sampling technique. Simple random technique gives equal chance to all the elements of the population and thus eliminates the biases in the sample. This technique was employed to select the students from the faculties as respondents of this study. However, for key informants like (Counsellors) purposive sampling was employed to get suitable informants for the study. Purposive sampling is a procedure in which specific information is obtained.

Data were collected through interviews, and focus group discussions. The combination of these techniques was believed to provide appropriate descriptions to which students' social factors would influence counselling seeking behaviour of students in higher learning institutions.

Focused Group Discussion as a tool was used to collect primary data from the selected university students. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006) a focused group discussion is a useful method for collecting primary data usually consisting of five to eight participants. Interviews were conducted for the purpose of collecting first-hand information from the counsellors as respondents. Descombe, (2010) suggests that, when a researcher needs to gain useful insights into things such as people's opinions, feelings, emotions, and experiences then interview is a more suitable method.

Data was analysed to examine what has been generated in a study and making deductions and inferences. It also involves scrutinising the acquired information and making inferences. When analysing qualitative data, analysis involves both thematic and content analysis. Thematic/content analysis involves reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meaning. Qualitative content analysis is a data analysis for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher used qualitative content analysis to present qualitative information from the interviews and Focus Group Discussion.

Social researchers are bound to ethical considerations in their studies. Confidentiality was also highly observed by the researcher as data and all information collected from the respondents were not shared anywhere. Data from this study was used for academic purposes only and not any other purpose.

#### **IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section shows analysis, presentation and discussion of the findings investigating the influence of social factors on counselling seeking behaviour of students at the higher learning institutions.

While conducting interviews, themes were developed from the responses as follows; peer influence, students' prior help seeking experience and counselling seeking, students' gender and counselling seeking, students' age and counselling seeking and students' family background and counselling seeking.

##### **First theme: Peer influence.**

This is indicative that sometimes mob-psychology may result in big problems emanating from peer groups. Students have to be careful with what they learn in their groups. The data gathered through interviews with the counsellors revealed that students' mob psychology may influence their further counselling seeking behaviour. The study revealed that the majority of the students who mostly sought counselling services were raised with the spirit of sharing their issues with their fellow friends in groups. Therefore, it is true that students' peer groups have the impact on students' seeking of counselling services at the university.

It was supported by the university counsellor that;

*“University students live like a community. They are in groups, either dormitories, courses etc. so when they see one of their own seeking counselling services, the rest are likely to follow suit also”.* (Interview with Counsellor Hall 13, August 2022).

**Students' Prior Help Seeking Experience and Counselling Seeking.**

This theme aimed at assessing how students' prior help seeking experience facilitated their readiness for counselling seeking. It was expected that students' prior helping seeking experience could influence counselling seeking behaviour in higher learning. The data gathered through interviews with the counsellors revealed that students' prior help seeking experience influenced their further counselling seeking behaviour. One of the counsellors had this to say;

*“There is a high rate of counselling sought by the students who know the importance of counselling services. Those who have no fear of sharing their problems and those who have families, always have a tendency of seeking counselling services because they have the experience of sharing the challenges with other people around them.”* (Interview with Counsellor Block A, August 2022).

The above assertion from an interview with the counsellor revealed that the majority of the students who mostly sought counselling services were raised with the spirit of sharing their issues with friends, members of their family, leaders and teachers as well as those who had families also had experience of sharing their concerns with neighbours and various professionals.

During FGDs students supported the idea that:

*“Though the students are of the same age, but the school of origin matters. This is because most of the students who studied in English media schools are mostly sharing their challenges and problems with others, for them it is easier to seek for counselling”* (FGD with Business Students, August 2022).

Therefore, it is true that students' prior help seeking experiences have the impact on students' seeking of counselling services at the university.

The findings of the current study and prior studies reported that prior experience to counselling services is important since it helps to develop a student's behaviour of seeking counselling. Furthermore, the study findings and literature reviewed revealed that those students who had no prior counselling experiences would not seek counselling easily. It is true that students' prior help seeking experiences have the impact on students' seeking of counselling services at the university. These study findings are supported by the study conducted by (Leech, 2007), on willingness to seek help and attitudes towards counselling seeking. The results of this study stated that individuals who had prior help experience had positive counselling seeking attitudes since they might have been benefited from it or they had reduced worries or fears related to psychological help after seeing the therapeutic environment.

Furthermore, the study findings by (Vogel, Larson, & Hackler, 2007), support the current study on the aspect of Students' prior help seeking experience. Their study (ibid) found that prior experience encourages someone to receive psychological help and knowing another who had previously received psychological help facilitates the seeking of counselling among individuals. The findings of the current study and prior studies reported that prior experience to counselling services is important since it helps to develop a student's behaviour of seeking counselling. Furthermore, the study findings and literature reviewed revealed that those students who had no prior counselling experiences would not seek counselling easily.

**Students' gender and counselling seeking.**

Interview with counsellors revealed that gender was one of the factors that influenced counselling seeking among students. For example, one of the counsellors had this to say:

*“Most of the female students have shown a positive response to seeking counselling services provided in higher learning institutions compared to males. I think their gender characteristic compels them to seek counselling once they face difficulties compared to male students”.* (Counsellor Block G, August 2022)

The quotation above implies that most of the students seeking counselling service were female students rather than male students. With this reason, female students seem to have a more positive attitude towards counselling services than male students. Furthermore, the data gathered through FGDs with students revealed that the gender of the counsellors also had influence on students' counselling seeking behaviour. For example, students said that:



*“Most of the students fear to speak their problems to the counsellor of the opposite gender because they feel ashamed to expose their problems which are closely related to their gender type. Also, some students have negative perceptions towards counselling especially when they find a counsellor of the opposite gender”.* (FGD with Business Students, August 2022).

Based on the quotation from the FGDs with students, it implies that gender either of the students or the counsellors matters a lot in counselling seeking at the university. This could be linked to cultural/traditional counselling practices whereby in most cases, girls are advised by female parents/elders the same as male parents/elders for boys.

This was also supported by one counsellor who said that:

*“The male students think that it is shameful for the man to expose their problems to the women because in the society males are strong and expected to liberate their families,”.* (Counsellors Block F, August 2022).

The above quotation reveals that, male students were experiencing greater gender role conflicts which led to less self-disclosure to women. Less self-disclosure then led to less positive attitudes and subsequently less willingness to seek counselling to female counsellors. The traditional male gender role and help seeking attitudes are related and this led to male students to hesitate visiting female counsellors for counselling services as they feared to be seen as weak. Generally, the findings indicated that females' students reported to have more positive overall attitudes and toward professional counselling seeking and were more willing to recognize a personal need for professional help compared to males. Femininity significantly influenced students' level of stigma tolerance. The study done by (Sue & Sue, 1990), studying the link between gender and attitudes towards help seeking also support the finding that females have more positive tendencies regarding seeking counselling services. Gender is a predicating factor that develops seeking attitudes. It was argued that women are more open to seeking help compared to men when faced with a problem.

#### **Students' Family Background and Counselling Seeking**

Under this theme, the family background of students was considered. The lifestyles of the family shape the members' behaviour. A family whose parents are not close to their children, do not even have time to sit with their children to advise them about different things concerning life, their children grow up with low confidence on sharing their personal issues. Furthermore, the economic and education level of the family shapes the behaviour of the family members.

This was supported by responses during the interview with one of the counsellors who had this to say;

*“The students who come from financially well-off families differ in their counselling seeking behaviour; they are more exposed and interact easily. They have a tendency of visiting counsellor's offices for help when they face difficulties, sharing success stories and even their left plans and vision”* (Counsellor Block 16, August 2022).

The quotation from an interview with one counsellor implies that students' family background such as high socioeconomic status increases counselling seeking behaviour because these students were exposed to different people since childhood and their parents taught them how to reveal their issues to others. These students understood the importance of sharing in the healing process. Findings from FGDs with students show that;

*“Living styles of the family shape behaviour of an individual, so it guides their decision on whether to perceive counselling services in a positive or negative way. For instance, students from educated families seek counselling services more than students from non-educated families”.* (FGD with Law Students, August 2022)

The above voice revealed that students' family background such as living styles has an impact on counselling seeking behaviour. Some students who come from uneducated families do face challenges but because of their background they perceive counselling services as something which has no help to them. On the other hand, the study found that more than fifty percent of the students admitted that the education level of the family had an impact on their participation in counselling. One of the students had this to say:

*“Education level of the family member has the contribution to the behaviour of the person in handling the problems that he or she encounters”* (Student from College of Education, August 2022).

The above quotation implies that there are some student problems that need counselling but because of their family background on problem solving, they find it difficult to share them. The nature and practices of problem solving among parents in the family, have an influence on students' counselling services in schools/colleges. Therefore, it is better to help

them recognize the importance of counselling services provided in their learning institutions. Generally, it was evident that sometimes students are worried about seeking counselling services in higher learning institutions. Students' family backgrounds such as socio economic status, education levels of the family members and family relations determine their readiness and decision to go to the Counsellor for counselling services.

Therefore, the counsellors need to find ways to influence students with different family backgrounds to develop counselling seeking habits. This was supported by responses during the interview with one of the counsellors who had this to say;

*"The students who come from financially well-off families differ in their counselling seeking behaviour; they are more exposed and interact easily. They have a tendency of visiting counsellor's offices for help when they face difficulties, sharing success stories and even their left plans and vision".* (Counsellor Hall 8. August 2022).

The lifestyles of the family shape the members' behaviour. A family whose parents are not close to their children, do not even have time to sit with their children to advise them about different things concerning life, their children grow up with low confidence on sharing their personal issues. Furthermore, the economic and education level of the family shapes the behaviour of the family members. This implies that students' family background such as high socioeconomic status increases counselling seeking behaviour because these students were exposed to different people since childhood and their parents taught them how to reveal their issues to others. These students understood the importance of sharing in the healing process. Furthermore, (Ndondo, 2004), revealed that university students who comes from high social economic status further along obtained educational levels higher than high school, they were more open to seek professional psychological help. More specifically, he found that the greater number of course credits an individual had received, the more confident they reported in receiving counselling services.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In the light of the study objective and discussion of the research findings, the following conclusions are made:

First, Students were aware of counselling services offered by Counsellors at UDOM in the form of group, academic, social, personal and career counselling. The students acknowledged that counselling services in higher learning institutions particularly UDOM helped them to solve and cope with their educational life by gaining strength to withstand different difficulties they were facing in their life. On the other hand, the study findings show that despite the availability of the counselling services at UDOM, students' motive to seek and engage in the service was still low. Then it was revealed that students' social backgrounds such as prior help seeking experience, gender, family background and age influenced their motives to seek and participate in formal counselling services. It was revealed that students who had prior help seeking experience had a positive attitude towards seeking counselling services. Furthermore, female students had a more positive attitude towards seeking counselling services than male students. Moreover, older students tended to seek counselling services more compared to young ones.

Also, students from families with high socioeconomic status and educated ones had a positive tendency towards counselling compared to students from non-educated families as well as low socioeconomic background.

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