Mental health help-seeking intentions: The role of personality traits in a sample of college students

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Abstract: Many college students with mental health problems do not seek help. One of the predisposing factors that influences mental health help-seeking is personality traits. This study aims to explore the role of such traits in the mental health help-seeking intention of college students. It is a cross-sectional study using the correlational method. An online survey employing convenience sampling technique was completed by 480 participants. The survey covered demographic data, the Big Five Inventory, and a mental health help-seeking intention questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and multivariate regression analysis. Conscientiousness (b = .170, p-value = .000) was significantly associated with a higher intention to seek mental health help. Higher neuroticism also predicted higher mental health help-seeking intentions (b = .165, p-value = .001). On the other hand, openness, extraversion, and agreeableness did not predict such intentions. The results suggest that personal disposition could affect help-seeking intentions and that certain personality traits had more impact on these. It is hoped that the results will contribute to providing better mental health support for students and promote help-seeking.

Keywords: college students; help-seeking; mental health; personality trait

Abstrak: Sebagian besar mahasiswa dengan masalah kesehatan mental tidak mencari bantuan kesehatan mental. Salah satu faktor predisposisi yang mempengaruhi pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental adalah kepribadian seseorang. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui peran kepribadian terhadap intensi pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental pada sampel mahasiswa. Penelitian adalah studi cross-sectional dengan metode korelasi. Sebanyak 480 partisipan berpartisipasi dalam survei daring. Survei ini berisi isian data demografis, *Big Five Inventory* dan kuesioner intensi pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, koefisien korelasi Pearson, dan analisis regresi multivariat. *Conscientiousness* (b = 0,170, p-value = 0,000) secara signifikan berhubungan dengan intensi yang lebih besar untuk mencari bantuan kesehatan mental. Tingkat *neuroticism* yang tinggi memprediksi intensi pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental (b = 0,165, p-value = 0,001). *Openness*, *extraversion*, dan *agreeableness* tidak memprediksi intensi pencarian bantuan kesehatan mental. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kecenderungan pribadi dapat mempengaruhi pencarian bantuan dan sifat kepribadian tertentu memiliki dampak yang lebih besar terhadap intensi pencarian bantuan. Hasil penelitian ini dapat berkontribusi terhadap pemberian dukungan kesehatan mental yang lebih baik bagi mahasiswa dan mendorong pencarian bantuan.

Kata Kunci: mahasiswa; pencarian bantuan; kesehatan mental; kepribadian

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Introduction

College can be a stressful time for students. Sources of stress include academic activities, and intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships (Isnayanti & Harahap, 2018; Kumaraswamy, 2013). Stress related to such relationships and academic demands can harm students' mental health (Hubbard et al., 2018). The negative effect of stress correlates with substance misuse, suicidality, sexual abuse, and higher morbidity (TS et al., 2017). The college student population is more vulnerable to experiencing mental health problems (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). A previous study on the student population in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, demonstrated that 51% of students experienced depression symptoms with varying degrees of severity, ranging from mild to severe (Fauziyyah & Ampuni, 2018). Subsequent studies on students in Aceh province reported that the prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders was 18.8% and 27.4% respectively (Marthoenis et al., 2018). Another study on medical students in Lampung province showed that the most common mental health problems found in this group were depression and anxiety disorders (Sari et al., 2017).

In Indonesia, according to a past studies, the majority of students with mental health problems did not seek or receive mental health assistance (Setiawan, 2006; Vidiawati et al., 2017). The factors that contribute to students' mental health problems include difficulty in adjusting to university life; the inability to cope with unfamiliar situations; difficulties in living independently; financial management problems; academic stress; loneliness; and problems interacting with others or maintaining close relationships (Kaligis et al., 2021; Kaloeti et al., 2019).

Although not specific to the college student population, Basic Health Research Report showed that only 9% of those with depression in Indonesia received treatment (Kemenkes RI, 2018, pp. 1–128). Another study explained that people in the 15-18 year age group suffering from anxiety were more likely not to seek psychological treatment (Tjandrarini et al., 2020). Research on students in Jakarta showed that 12.4% had mental health problems, but only 2.4% consulted a psychologist counselor at the university clinic in 2015-2016 (Vidiawati et al., 2017). This group of students showed depressive thinking, depressive feelings, somatic symptoms, and decreased energy. The ratio between students who received psychological counseling and those who did not was 1:42. Another study revealed that the rate of students' help-seeking with a professional psychologist in campus counseling or outside university in Surabaya was generally low (Setiawan, 2006). The prevalence of mental health problems should not be higher than the rates of those seeking mental health assistance and the utilization of professional mental health services. If this is the case, it is an indication that only a small percentage of students' mental health problems will have the opportunity to be resolved through professional help.

Previous studies have shown that several factors are associated with mental health help-seeking. Students who have a higher stress level will be more likely to seek help (Zochil & Thorsteinsson, 2018). A study of adolescents demonstrated that the factors promoting help-seeking intention included the recognition of the need for help; parents' positive intention to seek help for their children mental health problems; and the number of people to consult (Ando et al., 2018). Another study revealed that the perceived campus culture was correlated with help-seeking intentions (Chen et al., 2016). Nonetheless, mental health help-seeking is not simply a result of need, nor does it arise from factors related to other people. In our opinion, predisposing factors such

as personal and socio-economic characteristics may influence the need and enabling factors.

One such factor that influences the tendency of students to either seek or avoid professional psychological help is personality traits (Atik & Yalçin, 2011). Several studies have shown a significant relationship between such traits and the seeking of mental health help in various groups (Ingram et al., 2016; Kakhnovets, 2011; Park et al., 2018). The personality model commonly used to evaluate the structural pattern of personality is the Big Five Model (BFM), comprising openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John et al., 2008). Individuals with certain personality traits have a higher tendency to seek mental health help. Previous studies on the correlation between personality traits and mental health help-seeking have obtained mixed results. The personality traits of openness to experience and neuroticism are associated with an increased tendency to seek mental health assistance (Hengartner et al., 2016; Seekles et al., 2012). However, research on the relationship between conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness traits have obtained inconsistent results (Gulliver, 2015). From previous studies, we can see that certain personality traits were shown to be able to predict an increase in mental health help-seeking, but in another, opposite results were obtained.

The low rate of mental health help-seeking among students experiencing mental health problems raises the question of what factors cause this situation. Personality is one of the personal factors associated with mental health help-seeking. Although a few studies have suggested a relationship between personality traits and help-seeking, the findings are inadequate to explain the relationship, so further investigation is needed. Identifying the predictors of psychological help-seeking intention is essential to improve access to

mental health services. To the best of our knowledge, very few systematic studies have explored college students' personality traits and mental health help-seeking intentions in Indonesia. In this study, it is expected that personality traits will predict such intentions. Understanding the factors related to mental health help-seeking intentions will enable universities to design programs for students to increase their willingness to seek help. Therefore, based on the aim of this research to explore whether there is a relationship between personality traits and mental health help-seeking in a sample of Indonesian college students, five hypotheses were developed based on five personality traits: 1) The trait of openness will increase the mental health help-seeking intentions in the sample of Indonesian college students. 2) The trait of neuroticism will increase the mental health help-seeking intentions in the sample of Indonesian college students. 3) The trait of conscientiousness will decrease the mental health help-seeking intentions in the sample of Indonesian college students. 4) The trait of extraversion will decrease the mental health help-seeking intentions in the sample of Indonesian college students. 5) The trait of agreeableness will decrease the mental health help-seeking intentions in the sample of Indonesian college students.

Methods

Research Design

The research approach taken is non-experimental quantitative research. It is a cross-sectional study using the correlational method to examine the relationship between two or more variables.

Research Participants

The target population in the study were active undergraduate students studying at universities in Bandung, West Java Province. The inclusion

criteria were that they were 1) at least 18 years old; 2) registered as active undergraduate students; and 3) willing to be research participants. We excluded individuals if they scored equal to or less than two on bogus items, self-report items, or both. Five hundred and thirty-three participants accessed the link and completed the survey. However, 53 sets of data were excluded because they were not complete and therefore did not pass data screening phase. A final total of 480 participants were included.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants. A total of 480 undergraduate students (327 female and 153 male) participated in the study, with an age range from 18 to 24 (M = 20.18, SD = 1.34). They came from various study programs, including social sciences, engineering, arts and humanities, science, and health at various universities in Bandung; most were in their second year of study. The demographic data show that around 20% of the participants had consulted a mental health professional. In this group, the majority had sought help from friends. The mental health professionals included psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors.

Research Procedure

An anonymous online survey was conducted in Bandung for two weeks in February 2020. We first constructed the instruments to obtain information on the demographic background, with five questions regarding mental health services, and a scale to measure personality traits and mental health help-seeking intentions. The participants were recruited on the internet through the convenience sampling technique.

For the recruitment, digital posters and posts were distributed containing information related to the research, with links to the questionnaire through social media. The participants completed an online survey using Google Form. A reward was provided at the end of the survey to each participant who have participated in the research process in the form of a downloadable booklet consisting of a list of psychological services available in the Bandung area.

All the participants voluntarily completed the anonymous survey. When opening the link to the questionnaire, they were provided with a brief description of the research and an informed consent form. The participants were given an explanation of 1) the identity of the researcher, the research background, objectives, procedures and time needed to complete the survey; and 2) the research benefits and risks; together with 3) a guarantee of data confidentiality; and 4) an explanation of their right to withdraw from the study.

Participants could withdraw by closing and exiting the Google Forms page. Those who were willing to participate were asked to fill in their initials and press the "Continue" button. They then continued to the next page, which contained a demographic data sheet, five questions related to mental health services and two questionnaires. On the final page of the survey, the participants were asked to press the "Save" button to ensure that their responses were recorded in Google Forms. Survey completion took 10 to 15 minutes.

Research Instruments

We used a questionnaire that asked about the following areas: 1) demographic data, 2) personality traits, and 3) mental health help-seeking intentions. A socio-demographic form was used to collect self-report data on age, gender, university/faculty/department, and school year. The participants also provided information about peer relationship networks, experience of mental health providers, and knowledge of mental health services.

Big Five Inventory (BFI)

The BFI is a 44-item self-report inventory designed to measure the main five personality

Table 1

Characteristics of the Research Participants (N = 480)

Variable	N	%	M	SD
Age (years)			20.18	1.34
Gender				
Female	327	68.1%		
Male	153	31.9%		
Year of Study				
1	70	14.6%		
2	203	42.3%		
3	94	19.6%		
4	103	21.5%		
5	8	1.7%		
6	2	0.4%		
Previous consultation experience with mental health professionals *				
Yes	100	20.8%		
No	380	79.2%		
Who were the mental health professionals that you visited?				
Psychologist	71	71%		
Psychiatrist	8	8%		
Counsellor	10	10%		
Psyschologist and psychiatrist	11	11%		
Do you know others who are seeking mental health help?				
Yes	340	70.8%		
No	140	29.2%		
If you have mental health problems, who would you turn to for mental health help? +**				
Friends	284	26.64%		
Family	177	16.60%		
Internet/social media	164	15.38%		
Mental Health Professionals	142	13.32%		
Nobody	109	10.22%		
Partner	103	9.66%		
Book	87	8.16%		
Who are the mental health professionals? +				
Psychologist	372	41.79%		
Psychiatrist	363	40.78%		
Counsellor	40	4.49%		
Do not know	37	4.15%		
School counsellor	27	3.03%		
Doctor	16	1.79%		
Etc	35	3.93%		

Note. *All the participants answered this question regardless of whether they had had mental health problems or not. **Sources from whom students would seek mental health assistance if experiencing mental/psychological health problems. + Giving more than one answer was allowed.

traits, namely: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John et al., 1991b, 1991a). Each item uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The openness dimension consists of ten items, that of conscientiousness nine items, extraversion eight items, agreeableness nine items and neuroticism eight items. The BFI can be scored on the basis of the subscales by adding up the item choices in each dimension. It does not produce an overall total score. A higher score in each dimension indicates a stronger personality trait. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) has supported the construct validity of the Indonesian version of BFI, especially with regard to structural aspects (Rizkiyani et al., 2015). Reliability analysis using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) and Construct Reliability Coefficient (CR) showed that satisfactory internal consistency was found in the extraversion and neuroticism factors; openness (ICC = .52; CR = .57) and neuroticism (ICC = .77; CR = .77) showed the lowest and highest internal consistency. The ICC coefficient for the overall BFI was .58. Based on the value of the factor loading items, only the neuroticism scale displayed good psychometric properties. The results of the CFA analysis were indicated by the model fit index value. The CFI value was .52, which indicates a poor fit, but the RMSEA value was 0.069, indicating a good model fit.

Mental Help-seeking Intention Scale (MHSIS)

The MHSIS is a three-item instrument that measures a person's intention to seek professional mental health help if they have mental health problems (Hammer & Spiker, 2018). The MHSIS questionnaire only produces one total score obtained from the sum of the scores of the three items. This measuring instrument uses seven alternative answers, from 1 (very unlikely) and 7 (very likely). Higher scores indicate a higher level of intention to seek professional mental health help and individuals' readiness to seek mental health assistance if they are experiencing mental health problems. Reliability testing showed that the MHSIS scale had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.916. Based on the results of the analysis, the items on the MHSIS measuring instrument were good or adequate as they had corrected item-total correlation values ranging from 0.7-0.9. Due to the relatively small number of items, mathematically the instrument cannot be tested to assess the suitability of the model (fitness model). Therefore, evidence-based validity of the internal structure was obtained through EFA (Exploratory Factor Analysis). The EFA results showed that one factor from Mental Help Seeking Intention Scale had been identified. The first factor had the largest variance contribution (85.69, with an eigenvalue of 2.571). Based on the scree plot chart, the three items of MHSIS were combined into one factor, which can be seen from the slope of the line, with an eigenvalue of 2.5. The factor loading values of each item are above 0.5, namely M1 = 0.904, M2 = 0.961 and M3 = 0.911, which confirms that each item shares a common variance with other items. This finding supports the MHSIS measurement tool as a unidimensional instrument that produces a single total score.

Statistical Analysis

Data from each measurement were analyzed with descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to obtain the total score and the dimension score of each variable. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to explore correlation between variables. We used multiple regression analysis to identify which variables served as predictors of the respondents' mental health help-seeking intention. The Big Five personality traits were set as independent variables and the mental health help-seeking intention was the dependent variable. We did not perform separate analysis of the different demographic levels, nor include those as

interaction terms. Furthermore, Cohen's *d* effect size was calculated for all the comparisons, with *d* = between 0.02 and 0.05, *d* = between 0.05 and 0.08 and d ≥ 0.08, demonstrating small, moderate, and large effects respectively. All the tests were two-tailed, with a significance level of *p* < 0.05.

Results

Students' Personality Traits and Mental Health Help-seeking Intention

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviations, and ranges of the BFI and MHSIS. Five personality traits and mental health help-seeking intention scores were normally distributed.

Association between the Demographic Variables, Personality Traits, and Mental Health Help-SEEKING Intention

Gender was significantly associated with extraversion, neuroticism, and help-seeking intention. Female students had higher neuroticism (M = 27.9, SD = 5.75) than males (M = 24.1, SD = 6.52), *t*(478) = 6.34, p = 0.000. They also showed a higher intention to seek help (M = 14.94, SD = 4.23) (M = 13.65, SD = 4.36), *t*(478) = 3.08, p = 0.002. Conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism showed a significant difference based on previous consulting experience with mental health professionals. Neuroticism was higher among students who had had past experience of seeking help (M = 28.93, SD = 6.15) than those who had not (M = 26.12, SD = 6.14), *t*(478) = 4.103, p = 0.000. Students with previous experience of seeking help from mental health professionals had a higher intention to seek further help (M = 16.23, SD = 4.43) than those without past experience of doing so (M = 14.07, SD = 4.17), *t*(478) = 4.57, p = 0.000. According to the power calculation, we obtained a small to moderate effect size for each significant comparison (d ranged from 0.302 to 0.622). We

did not find significant difference in personality traits and mental health help-seeking intention based on knowledge about other people who had sought mental health help.

Table 3 shows the Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients of all the variables. Openness was positively correlated with conscientiousness, while conscientiousness was positively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and mental health help-seeking intention (*r* = .129, *p* = .005), but negatively correlated with neuroticism. Extraversion was positively associated with agreeableness but negatively associated with neuroticism. Agreeableness had a negative relationship with neuroticism. We found that neuroticism was negatively correlated with mental health help-seeking intention (*r* = .092, *p* = .043).

The following were the specifications of the model tested in the study: the independent variables (IV) were personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), and the dependent variable (DV) was mental health help-seeking intention. As shown in Table 4, we found that conscientiousness (β = .170, *p*-value = .000) was significantly associated with a higher intention to seek mental health help. From this finding, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed.

Higher neuroticism also predicted higher mental health help-seeking intention (β = .165, *p*-value = .001), a finding which confirmed Hypothesis 2. Openness, extraversion, and agreeableness did not predict mental health help-seeking intention. Openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism explained 2.8% of the total variance in mental health help-seeking intention (adjusted R^2 = .028). This finding may suggest that personality traits are not the dominant factors that predict mental health help-seeking in college students. The

personality characteristic is not a single variable because it consists of several traits. Furthermore, it is one of the predisposing factors that can facilitate the occurrence of behavioral intention with the help of enabling factors.

Discussion

It was found that conscientiousness and neuroticism were associated with a higher intention to seek mental health help in the sample of college students. The traits of openness, extraversion, and agreeableness were not associated with mental health help-seeking intention. Our results therefore only confirmed one hypothesis (Hypothesis 2).

Generally, conscientiousness negatively predicted unhealthy behavior (Jokela et al., 2013). Mental health help-seeking can be seen as healthy behavior as it is intended to take care of one's mental health and learn to be healthier and develop more effective coping skills. Therefore, individuals can avoid unhealthy and harmful coping skills when dealing with mental health problems. The conscientiousness trait is characterized by a sense of responsibility, low impulsiveness, self-control, discipline and a desire to achieve goals, which can explain a person's tendency to seek mental health assistance when experiencing mental health problems (Friedman et al., 2014; Schomerus et al., 2013).

Another explanation is the way in which individuals with high conscientiousness handle stressful situations. Stressors can include unpredictable events, taxing situations, and daily hassles, which can be annoying and disrupt people's lives. The tendency among people with high conscientiousness to seek order is manifested in their behavior to seek help to achieve such a sense of order in their daily life while dealing with stress. Previous research has shown that conscientiousness appears to be a protective factor against both stressful experience and subjective stress (Murphy et al., 2013). Another study found that conscientiousness promoted individual's self-perception of their health, in part by decreasing the subjective feeling of stress (Luo & Roberts, 2015).

Neuroticism also predicted higher mental health help-seeking intention. One barrier to seeking such help among college students is the difficulty in identifying mental health problems (Gulliver et al., 2010). Neuroticism might reflect mental health symptoms because it is characterized by anxiety, irritability, feeling emotional, and prone to experience problems related to stress (Feist et al., 2018). Individuals with high neuroticism have ineffective coping strategies and more often experience negative emotions. However, they may have better awareness of how they feel inside, information which is valuable for help-

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Personality Traits and Mental Health-Help Seeking Intention Scores

Measure	M	SD	Min	Max
Openness	35.81	5.27	22	49
Conscientiousness	27.47	5.67	13	42
Extraversion	24.98	6.13	9	40
Agreeableness	33.23	4.95	19	45
Neuroticism	26.71	6.25	9	40
Mental Health Help-Seeking Intention	14.53	4.31	3	21

M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum

Table 3

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation of Personality Traits and
Mental Health Help-seeking Intention

Measure	2	3	4	5	6
1. Openness	0.015	0.315**	0.07	-0.08	-0.018
2. Conscientiousness		0.147**	0.244**	-2.99**	0.129**
3. Extraversion			0.299**	-3.85**	0.014
4. Agreeableness				-0.274**	0.014
5. Neuroticism					0.092*
6. Mental Health Help-Seeking Intention					

* p < 0.05; ** p<0.01

Table 4

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of
Mental Health Help-seeking Intention

Independent Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Help-seeking Intention as DV						0.038	0.028
Openness	-0.22	0.039	-0.26	-0.557	0.578		
Conscientiousness	0.129	0.037	0.170	3.539	0.000		
Extraversion	0.042	0.037	0.060	1.142	0.254		
Agreeableness	0.001	0.042	0.002	0.032	0.974		
Neuroticism	0.114	0.035	0.165	3.219	0.001		

seeking. A previous study demonstrated that neuroticism was associated with a factor of vigilance, namely sensation awareness belief (Weston & Jackson, 2018).

Another study found that neuroticism was correlated with depression, and that those with high neuroticism were at risk of the development of common mental problems such as mood and anxiety disorders (Jeronimus et al., 2016). Our findings are backed by previous studies in which neuroticism was shown to increase mental health help-seeking (Drapeau et al., 2016; Park et al., 2017). Neuroticism has also been demonstrated to be a predictor of perceived need help (van Zoonen et al., 2015). Individuals with higher ne1uroticism might more open to their negative feelings, thus be encouraged to seek mental health help when facing related problems.

We also found an association between gender, past counseling experience, and mental health help-seeking intention among the students. Female students showed a higher intention to seek help compared to male ones. Gender differences in help-seeking could be related to the socialization of different gender roles for men and women, whereby women are more inclined to be open about their negative feelings (Zalta & Chambless, 2012). One systematic review found that the most significant barrier to seeking help was unwilling-ness to express emotions or concern about one's general or mental health (Yousaf et al., 2015).

Mental health help-seeking intentions were higher among students with past counselling experience. This finding is in line with previous research that has demonstrated that previous counselling experience was positively related to

students' willingness to seek counselling for their problems (Li et al., 2013). Students who seek help might perceive counselling as beneficial for them, hence they have a higher intention to do so if they experience mental health problems. A previous study revealed that perceived benefits were more important than barriers in predicting help-seeking behavior (O'Connor et al., 2014).

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The data were obtained from a cross-sectional design study, which does not allow a causal relationship between variables. The study also depends on self-reported information, which may be affected by participants' perception of the items in the questionnaire. Moreover, we only included participants who were internet users and tech savvy. We only found a small percentage of total variance in the model testing. It is suggested that future research add more predisposing and enabling factors related to help-seeking. The sample size could also be larger to ensure generalization.

Conclusion

Conscientiousness was significantly associated with a higher intention to seek mental health help and neuroticism predicted higher mental health help-seeking intentions. Seeking mental health help can be seen as a type of health behaviour and as a preventive measure against mental health problems. Neuroticism together with conscientiousness may become protective factors, as both facilitate help-seeking. There was an association between gender and mental health help-seeking intention. Female students showed a higher intention to seek help than males. Past counseling experience with mental health professionals was also associated with mental health help-seeking intentions.[]

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