

# Reasons Why University Students Do Not Seek Counselling Services in Kenya

Ruth Njeri Kamunyu \*

Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Gender and Development Studies, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844-00100 GPO- Nairobi, Kenya

Prof. Catherine Ndungo

2Institute of African Studies, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844, -00100 GPO- Nairobi, Kenya,

Dr. Geoffrey Wango

Department of Psychology University of Nairobi, P.O Box 30197 Nairobi, 00100, Kenya

## Abstract

Transition to university life can be stressful for all students. In mitigation, most universities in Kenya offer social support to students in form of counselling, financial assistance, health and academic support. Despite this it has been documented that only a minority of university students who experience psychological distress seek professional counselling (Khan and Williams, 2003, Raunic and Xenos, 2008) a situation that is the same in Kenya. According to university counsellors, university students undergo tremendous stress from personal issues, academic pressure, career emphasis and social problems. Counselling is meant to provide linear paths for students to address their problems. However, some students are reluctant to seek help from counsellors. This paper is a report on a study that sought to establish the reasons why university students in Kenya do not seek counselling services.

**Key words:** Gender, Social Mistrust, Confidence, immediate solutions, Perception, Location

## 1. Literature Review

Studying at university is associated with experiencing significant stressors in including stress experienced by new students after transiting to a university life (Atwarter, 2003 Julal, 2013). Triggers to this stress can be linked to increased academic demands, constrained finances, lack of employment and personal relationships (Julal, 2013). Entry into educational institutions for first generation learners expose them to psychological problems that are personal, vocational and social and hence a need for counselling (Nyaga, 2011). In retrospect, Frank and Karyn (2005) argue that university undergraduate students are young adults in need of counselling services. Counselling services aim at assisting and supporting students that experience psycho-sociological problems especially as they transit into university life. Such problems can potentially disrupt their academic, inter-personal and campus-life adjustments (International Association of Students Affairs and Services Professionals, 2001). Arguably, providing counselling services is important in increasing the likelihood of students to continue and complete their studies (Biswalo, 1996; Commission for University Education, 2015; Wango, 2015). Consequently, universities have a responsibility and obligation to offer counselling services to all students. It is in this regard, Kenyan universities offer social support to students in form of counselling, financial assistance, health and academic intervention. The Kenyan Commission for University Education (2013) stipulates that counselling is an essential service that must be available to students in institutions of higher education before they are accredited.

The purpose of counselling services in the learning institutions is to offer psychological support to students (International Association of Students Affairs and Services Professionals, 2001). However, despite the availability of counselling services in universities it has been documented that only a minority of university students who experience psychological distress seek professional counselling (Khan and Williams, 2003; Raunic and Xenos, 2008). A study by Raunic and Xenos (2008) found out that only a very small percentage of between 2% to 4% of university students seek counselling services with females being more likely to use them than males. There is therefore a need to understand reasons that prevent students from seeking counselling services. This paper presents findings on reasons why university students in Kenya do not seek counselling services

## 2. Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey design. It used mixed methodology that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Kothari (2004) posits that a survey can be utilised to study large or small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population, such as the large number of university students

involved in this study. A survey enables one to determine state of affairs as they exist, (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). The target population were the 65 Universities in Kenya by 2015 (Commission for University Education, 2015). The accessible population were three universities; Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology; Kenya Methodist University and Mount Kenya University. Stratified, simple random and purposive sampling methods were used to sample the participants in the three universities. The sample size was 310 students and seven student counsellors. Research instruments included a questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussion Guide. Questionnaires had sub-sections that contained a 5-point Likert Rating (LR) Scale with five statements adopted from Stephen and Smith (1991). The five choices ranged from; 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree. Quantitative Data was analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was used to supplement interpretation of quantitative data. In this study, the chi-square test of independence was used to examine possible association between categorical variables such as whether the pattern of response on issues differed significantly for some of the statements on the subject under study. If significance was established, it implied that respondents' opinions on the statements were not the same. The instruments were piloted at one private and one public university. Reliability of questionnaires was determined through test-retest method. Pearson's Product Moment Formula was used to calculate the correlation coefficient between the tests. The test retest scores showed a correlation coefficient of 0.93 for counsellors and 0.89 for students which indicates that the instruments were highly reliable.

### 3. Results and Discussions

The following section discusses the results

#### 3.1 Reasons why Students do not seek Counselling Services

The study sought to find out the reasons why students in the universities do not seek professional counselling services yet the services were available free of charge. The study established that a large number of students in the universities failed to seek counselling from counsellors due to a variety of reasons. These reasons are discussed in the section below and summary shown in table 1 below.

**Table 1 Reasons why Students do not Seek Counselling Services**

Responses	Counsellors		Students	
	M%	F%	M%	F%
Gender of Counsellors	14	16	21	26
Social Mistrust		14	10	13
Lack of Confidence in Counsellors		14	2	3
Confidentiality level of Issues	14		3	4
Peer Pressure		14	6	9
Seek help from significant others	14		1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>57</b>

#### 3.1.1 Gender of Counsellor

Table 1 shows that on gender of the counsellor, two counsellors (14% male, 16% female) and 90 students (21% male, 26% female) identified gender of the counsellor as a key reason that makes students fail to seek counselling services. For instance, male students do not seek help for masculine related issues from female counsellors lest they are seen as 'weak' or 'unable to cope' with issues. This can be attributed to their socialization process where males are socialized to believe that they are strong (O'neil, 2006). This study noted that there was a gender difference in attitude toward seeking counselling services among university students in which the female student is more positive than the male student and which corroborated with findings from Nelson (2003). It also corroborated with views from Speight and Vera (1997) who explored the actual importance of the similarities between the counsellor and the client giving advantages whenever the client and counsellor share similarities like gender and ethnicity. This is in line with the social learning theory that provided the foundation for this study. In addition few female students would seek menstruation problems from male counsellors.

#### 3.1.2 Social Mistrust

The results also show that social mistrust took second position with 14% counsellors and 23% students agreeing that it's a reason that makes them not to seek counselling services. A discussion with the students elicited varying feelings that showed how they mistrusted counselling services. The study showed that students used counsellors to get help and understanding for their problems but whether this worked or not depended on how genuine the counsellor was, how able the student was to speak about their problems and the relationship between the two. Some of the students considered seeking help from counsellors as a waste of time since they have their own ways of resolving problems. This corroborated well with the Person Centred Theory adopted in this study.

### *3.1.3 Lack of confidence in counsellors*

Others cited confidentiality level of issues (14% counsellors, 7% students), peer pressure (14% counsellors 15% students) and help from significant others and the internet (14% counsellors, 3% students). Confidentiality is essential since it helps the client to trust the privacy of their revelations to the counsellor and it enhances the counselling relationship. Students explained that some of the counsellors occasionally make students' issues public and thus those who are affected feel disillusioned since confidentiality as a cardinal skill in counselling is not adhered to by such counsellors (American Counselling Association, 2014; Bond, 2009). Students expressed fear of being labelled in a negative way. As a result, students with counselling issues feared being used as 'examples' by lecturers when teaching.

### *3.1.4 Lack of immediate solutions*

Lack of immediate solutions for some problems such financial issues was cited as a reason why some students could not seek counselling services. Consequently, this made them either to look for alternative ways of solving their problems or they kept those issues to themselves. In retrospect, King and Wheeler (1999) indicate that when timely, a brief period of counselling is often sufficient to get students "back on track". However, if they have to wait long for help, they will give up and withdraw. Thus Rana (2000) emphasizes that counselling services that are accessible when students want and need them are much likely to be effective than that which is available weeks later.

### *4.1.5 Location of the Counselling Centre*

Several students voiced concern about friends seeing them entering the counselling centre. "My friends will think I am crazy" was the way one summed it up. This implied that the potential for devaluation of the self in the eyes of others was a major source of anxiety among the students. This also suggests that the counselling room was not appropriately located. A university counsellor described students walking past the office door several times before finally entering and recommended having the counselling centre next to the health centre so that the students' reason for entering the building would be uncertain.

### *3.1.6 Perception of the Students*

Perception was another reason in that some students claimed that counselling was for lower level students, not university students. Other reasons related to perception that made students' underutilize university counselling services included; perceived self-sufficiency, denial as a coping style, unwillingness to discuss personal problems and lack of knowledge about counselling services. Others attributed their failure to seek counselling services to being 'shy' and therefore unable to disclose to counsellors some very personal issues. In addition, tight academic schedules for students with psychological issues meant that students have little or no time left for counselling. Consequently, students seek answers to 'fix' their problems from significant others, fellow students, peers and the internet..

## **4. Summary**

The gender of the counsellor is a key reason that makes students fail to seek counselling services. The study also shows that whether counselling services worked or not depended on how genuine the counsellor was, how able the student was able to speak about their problems and the relationship between the two. The study also revealed confidentiality and confidence in counsellors is a concern since students explained that some of the counsellors occasionally make students' issues public and thus those who are affected feel disillusioned. The study further revealed that lack of immediate for some problems such as those related to finances made students either to look for alternative ways of solving their problems or they kept those issues to themselves. Potential for devaluation of the self in the eyes of others was a major source of anxiety among the students who worried about the thought of peers who saw them enter the counselling centre. Perception was another reason in that some students in which reasons such as thoughts that counselling was for lower level students, perceived self-sufficiency, denial as a coping style, unwillingness to discuss personal problems and lack of knowledge about counselling services were cited.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study showed that both male and female students are faced with many counselling issues such as academic, psychological, social, personal, economic, health, physical, vocational and spiritual. However, there are several reasons that prevent students from seeking counselling services. The study revealed these reasons to be gender of the counsellor, social mistrust in the counselling service, lack of confidence in the counsellors, location of the Counselling Centre, location of the counselling centre and perception of the Students.

## 6. Recommendations

The study recommends that university counselling service be gender sensitive. In addition counsellors should seek to improve positive attitudes and perception towards counselling services among the students. The university counsellors should also uphold confidentiality and should desist from discussing counselling cases in class. The location of counselling centres should be friendly to students concerns of privacy; for example they could be located near hospitals.

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