

## Stages in the Help-Seeking Decision-Making Process and Factors Involved

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This paper describes a study designed to investigate stages in the help-seeking decision making process and factors involved. A multi-method design was adopted which involved 1,279 respondents. Results found that there was a hierarchical system in coping behaviour. Respondents tried to face their problems on their own before seeking help. Internal resources and problem perceived, social impacts, and personal characteristics were involved in help-seeking decision process. Personal qualities of and familiarity with the potential helpers, perceived capacity to help, social role and the accessibility of the potential helpers, guarantee of confidentiality were considered in the selection of helpers.

*Keywords:* help-seeking, sources of help, self-reliance

Artikel ini memaparkan suatu studi yang menggali tahap-tahap proses pembuatan putusan mencari-bantuan dan faktor-faktor yang terlibat. Diadopsi sebuah desain multi-metode yang menyertakan 1,279 responden. Hasil mengungkapkan adanya sistem hierarki dalam perilaku *coping*. Para responden mencoba menghadapi sendiri masalahnya sebelum mencari bantuan. Sumber-sumber internal dan masalah yang dipersepsi, dampak sosial, dan cirri-ciri personal terlibat dalam proses pembuatan putusan dalam mencari-bantuan. Kualitas pribadi dan sudah dikenalnya penolong potensial, perkiraan kapasitasnya, peran sosial dan mudahnya menemui penolong yang potensial, serta jaminan kerahasiaan, dipertimbangkan dalam memilih para penolong.

*Kata kunci:* mencari-bantuan, sumber bantuan, percaya diri

It is widely acknowledged that students face many different concerns during their academic career in the university. In their transitional period from adolescence to young adulthood, students experience many changes in their lives. This period gives opportunities for them to grow, but also involves unbearable stress. Brown and Ralph (1999) point out that students may experience eustress or positive stress which help them promote their personal growth. In the same time they have the potential to experience distress.

Many studies have been conducted to investigate concerns that students experience during their academic career in the university such as Carney, Peterson, & Moberg (1990), Cook et al. (1984), Grayson, Clarke, & Miller, (1995), Rudowich and Au (2001), Setiawan, (2004). Carney et al. in the USA found

that self-support finances, career indecision/job search frustration, and academic performance difficulties were the most common concerns to students. Cook et al. in their study in the USA found educational achievement and anxiety were the most frequently cited problems. While Grayson et al. in their study in a university in the UK found that problems with finance, course related, domestic, interpersonal and personal crisis, and the management of resources and facilities were the five superordinate clusters of problems experienced by students. While Rudowich and Au found that problems related to study, health, emotional life, and peer relationships, love relationships were the ones experienced most by Hong Kong students. Setiawan in her study among Indonesia students found that academic-related problems were the highest reported problems. More than 50% students also reported problems related to self, depression and mood change, romantic relationships, welfare, other relationships, anxiety, loss, and transitions.

Numerous studies have also been conducted to examine students' preferred helper in many different

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This article has been presented at the XXIX International Congress of Psychology, July 20-25, 2008, ICC, Berlin, Germany.

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cultural contexts. Cook et al. (1984), Dubow, Lovko, & Kausch (1990), Offer, Howard, Schonert, & Ostrov (1991) and Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh (1999) have investigated the issue in a Western context. Gibson et al. (1992) held a similar study in seventeen countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Netherlands, the Philippines, and the People's Republic of China, Puerto Rico, Russia, Turkey, USA and Venezuela. While other studies were completed in other cultural contexts such as Soliman (1993) in Kuwait, Boldero and Fallon (1995) and Gonzales (2001) in Australia, Skuy, Hoar, Oakley-Smith, & Westaway (1985) in South Africa, Amiran Raviv, Sills, Alona Raviv, and Wilansky (2000) in Israel, Lin (2001) in Taiwan, and Rudowich and Au (2001) in Hong Kong. Although the studies were conducted in many different cultural contexts, the studies generally found that friends and family members were the most favoured sources of help from whom students would seek help, apart from themselves.

However, the processes involved in help-seeking are still rarely investigated especially in an Indonesian context. If friends, family members, and self are the most popular helpers that students would seek help from, is it true that students go to the their preferred helper straight away and in every single situation? Are there any stages in help-seeking decision making process? What considerations involved in the helpseeking decision making process? With the aim at investigating stages in the help-seeking decision making process and factors involved, the current study was conducted.

## Method

To examine stages in the help-seeking decision making process and factors involved, a multi-method design was adopted in this study. This involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, however they were relatively independent until the interpretation stage (Niglas, 2000). A total of 1,279 undergraduates volunteered to participate in the questionnaire survey. The ages of students ranged 17 to 26, with a mean age of 19.7. The student participants were from the study programs of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, and Industrial Engineering in two private universities which are situated in an urban area in Indonesia.

### Quantitative Approach

In the quantitative end, all participants ( $N = 1,279$ ) were given a self-administered questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire consists of 14 items representing 14

areas of concerns commonly experienced by students. The areas of concern included Academic, Transitions, Welfare, Parental Relationships, Romantic Relationships, Other Relationships, Loss, Physical Health, Self, Depression and Mood Change, Compulsive Behaviour, Abuse, and Sexual Issues. On each item, students were given 14 choices of sources of help, including Father, Mother, Brother, Sister, Other relatives, Spouse/Boy- or Girlfriend, Lecturer, Friend, Counsellor, Doctor / Psychiatrist, Religious Leader, Guardian, Self, Others. Respondents were asked to imagine them-selves of having serious problems in the stated area of concern. They were asked to choose one of fourteen choices of sources of help that they were most likely to choose to talk with. In the analyses, the percentage of students choosing each source of help per area of concern was calculated.

### Qualitative Approach

In order to investigate the dynamics involved in a help-seeking decision, reasons underlying the decision to seek help and the selection of certain sources of help, a semi-structured individual interview and focus group discussion were used. Among 1,279 respondents, 32 students participated in individual interviews and 36 students participated in focus groups discussions, which were divided into four groups.

Topics discussed in the interviews and focus group discussions involved the selection of helpers in various areas of concern. Participants were encouraged to mention sources of help that they normally see when they have problems. Participants were also asked to give their considerations or reasons for choosing or not choosing somebody else to help, for choosing or not choosing a specific helper and not the others.

## Results

### Quantitative Data

The analyses of questionnaire found that overall friend, mother and self were the most frequently selected helpers compared to other sources of help. However, data analyses showed that the most frequently selected helpers were not exactly same in each area of concern.

Results showed that Friend was the most frequently selected in the areas of concern including Academics, Transitions, Romantic Relationships, Other Relationships, Loss, Depression and Anxiety. Mother was the

most popular choice in the areas of concern including Welfare, Parental Relationships, and Physical Health. Whereas the choice of Self as source of help was selected most frequently in the areas relating to Self, Compulsive Behaviour, Abuse, and Sexual Issues. These results suggest that even though there are some popular choices of helpers, which helpers to choose in a specific time depend on the type of problem.

### Qualitative Data Preferred Sources of Help

Based on the analyses of data gathered from interview and focus group sessions, it revealed that Friend, Mother and Self were chosen in more areas of concern than other sources. In general, Friend was the most frequently chosen source of help in relation to Academic, Transitional, Romantic Relationships, Other Relationships, Depression and Mood Change concerns. In terms of Welfare, Physical Health, and Loss, Mother was found to be the most popular choice. For problems related to Self, participants tended to not to see others for help.

### Considerations in Choosing Sources of Help

**Seeking help from others or not?** Participants reported that they normally tried to deal and solve their problems on their own before seeking somebody else for help. They would see somebody for help only when they found that the problems were beyond their personal resources to help themselves.

*“Yak apa ya, kalau ke temen itu mungkin lebih misale lebih bener-bener sumpek, aku masalahku berat, nggak isa pecahkan, ya aku ke temen, anggepanne ada aku misalnya punya pundi-pundi yang aku timbun yaitu apa aku mendem, aku ngalah atau apa, emosiku tak tahan, tak tahan, tak tahan, dengan banyak masalah, kan pasti banyak emosi, tak tahan-tahan, misale penuh, kan harus ada tempat untuk membuang-nya, ya itu ke temen. Temen itu nomor dua”.*

“I go to friend only after I am really stressed out, can’t solve my problem. It’s like a bag, I put everything inside, I keep putting in, [...] until it’s full, I need to pour things out. That’s a friend. Friend is number two” Comment [RT1], Page: 35, [158, M]

In individual interview and focus group sessions, a small number of students mentioned that they preferred

not to choose anybody for help. They just chose themselves as the source of help. Included in this category are those who internally appraised of the situation and find out possible solutions, those who used books as resources to help them deal with their problems, those who used a spiritual way to help, and those who were denial and escaping.

Some issues have been identified from reasons participants raised for choosing themselves and not choosing other social resources to deal with their problems. The issues related to personal characteristics, nature of problem, availability of social resources and trust. Regarding personal characteristics, a small number of students admitted that they had difficulty with disclosing themselves to others. They did not want people to know all about them. Others mentioned that they used to be independent when dealing with problems.

“Well, I am not sure. It might be because of my introvert personality. I can’t disclose all things to others. I also don’t want people to know all about me”

Other students pointed out that they did not find other resources but rely on themselves as the problems were minor and within their capacity to deal with. Some problems were although to be beyond other’s capacity to help, so it would be useless to seek others for help. Some other problems were too embarrassing to be known by others, so the participants decided not to choose anybody to help.

*“Hm, kalau diri sendiri itu, ada masalah yang kadang-kadang tidak bisa diselesai-kan dengan orang lain, atau yang tidak ingin orang lain tahu, gitu. Ya itu diselesaikan sendiri.”*

“There are some problems that sometimes can’t be helped by others, or problems that I don’t want other people to know, in that case I deal with them on my own.” Comment [RT2], Page 35, [272, R]

Furthermore students revealed that they did not choose anybody for help as the other sources of help were not available. Other reasons for not choosing any sources of help were that participants did not trust others in terms of understanding, genuineness, and confidentiality.

*“Pertama ya mungkin kalau kalau masalahnya saya rasa itu masalah kecil itu untungya selama ini aku isalah ngatur sendiri. Ya itu salah satunya*

*itu kenapa aku nggak mau cerita, karena itu tadi, karena aku nggak percaya seratus persen sama temen ya. Soale kadang temen itu, kadang itu, kita ngomong gini, ternyata itu dia ternyata, 'kamu bok bilang sapa-sapa', nanti ternyata itu dia bilang, ataupun sengaja ataupun nggak sengaja. Dalam arti sengaja itu karena mungkin dia ada masalah sama aku, dia ceritakan ke temen yang lain. Andaikan ndak sengaja, mungkin keceplosan atau gimana, jadi lebih baik aku simpan sendiri aja.'*

"One of the reasons why I don't talk over my problems is, I don't 100% trust friends. Sometimes we asked them not to tell [our problems] to other people, but they eventually passed them on to others, whether or not they did it on purpose." Comment [RT123], Page: 35, [127, H]

*"Mungkin kalau aku ketemu sama orang sing pas gitu, pas dee itu isa masuk ke pikiranku, jadi dee itu ngerti jalan pikiranku apa apa, mungkin aku mau cerita. Tapi lek endak, aku ndak mau. Ya itu". [242, S] "Isa gitu, mungkin isa juga dia itu nggak ngerti pokok masalahnya gitu, jadi mungkin anggapane ya kog gitu aja dipikiri, gitu lho. Kan juga isa kayak gitu kan."*

"If I meet a person who suits me, who can understand my ways of thinking, maybe I want to talk [over my problems]. If not, I won't. [...] They might not understand my problems, they might think why I need to bother about these." Comment [RT2], Page: 35, [238, S]

**Which helper to go to?** In individual interview and focus group sessions, participants were encouraged to discuss their reasons for choosing a specific person for help and not choose others. Some concerns were consistently pointed out as the considerations for helper selection, including personal qualities of the helper, familiarity with the helper, capacity of the helper to help, accessibility, role perceived, and confidentiality. Among these considerations, personal qualities of the helper and familiarity with the helper were raised as the strongest considerations.

In relation to personal qualities of the helper, understanding, acceptance, caring and genuineness were pointed out as their favored personal qualities. Before choosing a certain helper, participants wanted to be ensured that the helper would be able to understand themselves and their problems. Similar experience, familiarity and sensitivity to situations, and sensitivity

to feelings were regarded as an important component to build the qualities of understanding. Included in the understanding qualities is the ability to see from participants' points of view, such as:

"Because so far I feel that my mum can understand me more [than others]. It has been said that women are more emotionally sensitive. Therefore, I just feel comfortable to talk with mum, she can understand me."

"Most religious leaders see things only from a religious perspective, from one angle, religion only. They don't see things from my background. They don't see things from my cultural point of view; don't see things from my life."

With regard to acceptance and caring, permissive climate to share problems or ask questions without fear of being criticized, blamed, or laughed was raised as important. Included in this acceptance is willingness to be tolerant and caring.

The other important personal quality is congruence or genuineness in helping. Genuineness in helping means that the helper is not pretending to be good, to care for others, but genuine and really wants to help. Participants also preferred somebody who shows congruence between what they say and what they do.

In addition to personal quality of helper, familiarity with the helper was consistently pointed out as the factor encouraging the selection of a certain helper. Students mentioned that a sense of familiarity and closeness in relationships were felt towards friends and mother. This enabled them talk over their problems with friends and mother comfortably. On the contrary, other sources of help such as counselors, lecturers and religious leaders were seen as outsiders. The sense of unfamiliarity prevented them from talking about their personal situation to these helpers.

Perception about helper's capacity to help was also a part of considerations to choose a certain source of help. Capacity to help relates to the ability to help and give solutions which is concrete and applicable in real life. According to participants, abilities to help and give concrete and applicable solutions were strongly related to familiarity. Unlike counselors and religious leaders, friends and mother know them well, so that friends and mother have a better ability to help.

"Religious leaders normally, if we have problems, ask us to pray for example, pray for your friend. But we are not patients. If we only pray, it doesn't guarantee that it works."

The issues of accessibility were also raised as a reason for choosing a certain helper. Participants reported that they choose friends or mothers as friends and mothers are always more accessible compared to other sources of help. The selection of helper was also influenced by participants' perception towards the role of the potential helper. Participants perceived that all children's affairs were covered in mother's roles. Therefore they thought that talking about their affairs to their mother is more appropriate than talking to their father. Talking personal problems to lecturers was regarded as inappropriate as lecturers were perceived as having the role of dealing with academic matters only.

In addition to personal qualities of helper, familiarity with helper, capacity of the helper to help, accessibility, role perceived, the issues of confidentiality were also raised as consideration factors in selecting a helper. Those who cannot keep confidentiality were avoided and were not favored as a helper.

## Discussion

### Help-Seeking as a Dynamic Process

Quantitative data analyses showed that friends and mothers were the most popular sources of help. However, data analyses also showed that participants did not seek help straight away from these sources of help when they face problems. It was already pointed out earlier that participants normally tried to deal and solve their problems on their own before seeking somebody else for help. They would seek for help only when they could not face the problems themselves. This fact leads to an understanding that there is a hierarchical system in coping behaviour or in help-seeking behaviour.

It was also found that some students tended to rely on their own resources as they had difficulties in disclosing their personal problems to others. Types of problems also influenced participants' decision whether or not to seek somebody for help. Some problems will not be discussed with others as the problems were perceived as within their capacity to self-help. Some problems were regarded as very personal and potentially embarrassing so that participants would prefer to keep the problems themselves. The data revealed that before an individual decide to seek help, there are several factors involved in the process of help-seeking decision.

After individuals decide to seek help, it seems that individuals get into another decision-making process in order to be able to come to a decision which helpers they want to seek help from. Findings from the quantitative data showed that across all areas of concern friend, mother

and self were the most frequently selected helpers compared to other sources of help. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses also showed that the most frequently selected helpers were not exactly same in each area of concern. In certain type of problem, individuals might turn to some one that normally s/he does not turn to for help. For example, generally Lecturer was not a popular source of help chosen, but Lecturer was the third most popular choice for Academic problems. This indicates that help-seeking process is very dynamic. Types of problem and the competence of the helper influence the selection of a helper. Individuals might have main sources of help to be selected, but the one chosen at a particular time also depends on the nature of the problem which related to the competence of the potential helper.

In addition to helper's capacity to help, findings from qualitative data also established that in selecting helpers individuals consider these issues, including personal qualities of helpers (such as understanding, acceptance, caring, and congruence), familiarity with the helper, capacity of the helper to help, accessibility, role perceived, and confidentiality. Among these considerations, personal qualities of the helper and familiarity with the helper were raised as the strongest considerations.

It is revealed from the results of the present study that there are stages in the help-seeking decision-making process. The stages in the help-seeking decision making process and factors involved are illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in the figure 1, the process of help-seeking decision-making consists of two stages. Stage 1 refers to self-reliance. Stage 2 is seeking help from others. When an individual has a problem, before considering seeking others for help, an individual relies on his or her own resources. If s/he perceive that dealing with the problems his/herself is beyond their capacity, they then consider seeking others for help. However, before s/he comes into a decision to seek others for help, s/he would take into account their personal characteristics, their perceptions of the type of problem and possible social impacts. The process would lead him/her into a decision whether or not to seek someone for help.

If s/he decides to seek help from others, s/he goes to stage 2. However, before reaching a decision to select a certain source of help, there are several factors to be considered. The personal qualities of the potential helpers, personal familiarity with the potential helpers strongly influence the choice. Furthermore, the capacity of the potential helpers to help satisfyingly, the easiness to be accessed, the perceptions of the potential helpers' role, and the guarantee of confidentiality are also taken into account.

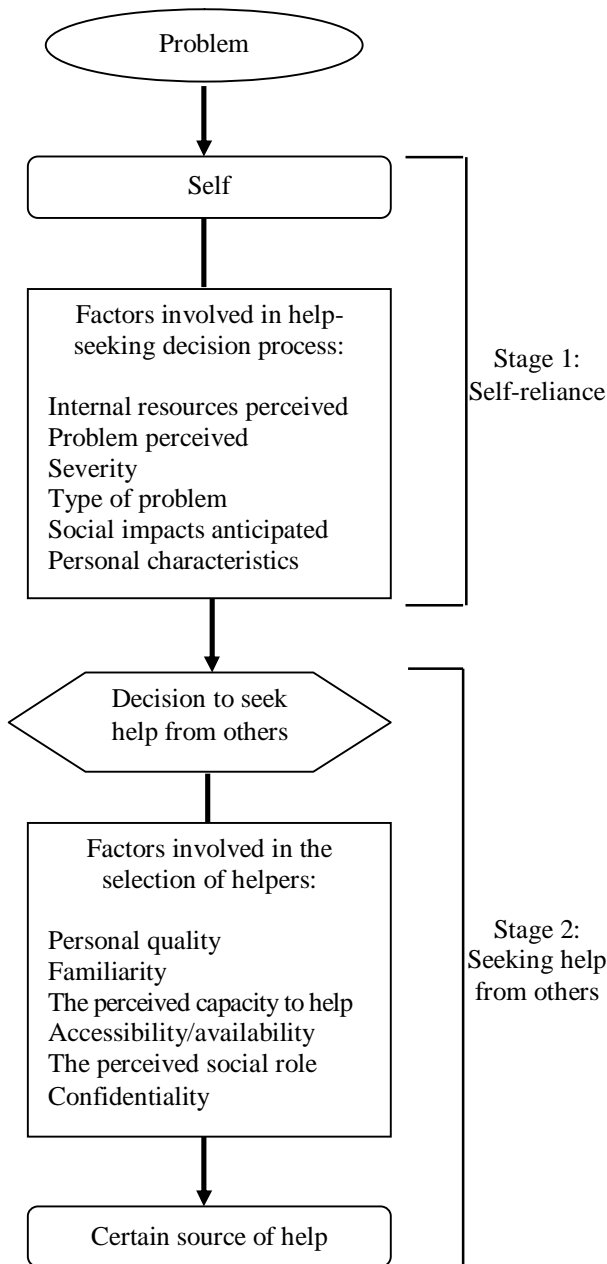


Figure 1. Stages in the help-seeking decision-making process and factors involved (Setiawan, 2004, p. 289)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Having scrutinized data resulted from the current study, it could be concluded that help-seeking behaviour is not a static process, but involves dynamic appraisals of problems, the self, internal resources, social resources and the impact of help-seeking. Individuals normally rely on their own resources before seeking some one for help

and there is a possibility that individuals will not turn to anybody for help. Therefore, efforts to equip students with self-help knowledge need to be encouraged. Work-shops on problems commonly faced by students, and problem solving process need to be established. Other recommendations would go to other adults to whom students would potentially seek help from. Potential helpers should to improve their personal qualities, such as understanding, acceptance and caring, congruence. Potential helpers should find ways of making themselves close to students, so that students would not hesitate to talk over their problems when they need to.

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