**Personal Perceptions and Cultural Motivations in Relation to Intention to Seek Professional Psychological Help in the Ultra-Orthodox Community and in the Religious Zionist Community in Israel**

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**Abstract**

Professional psychological help is viewed as a vital course of action for people suffering from mental health difficulties and, as a result, it may improve people’s well-being, as well as prevent decline in one’s psychological health and harm to one’s body and mind (Bockting, Hollon, Jarrett, Kuyken & Dobson, 2015; Hou et al., 2014; Schlarb, Faber & Hautzinger, 2018). However, many individuals who need professional psychological help do not seek it for a myriad of reasons (Codony et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2007a). The body of research that addresses the processes that encourage or discourage the seeking of professional psychological help suggests that, along with the cognitive and perceptual aspects that predict help-seeking (White, Clough & Casey, 2018), the cultural context holds a great significance; in fact, cultural context influences professional psychological help-seeking in a number of different ways (de la Cruz et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2014; Sultan, 2012). The current study focused on two faith-based communities in Israel – the religious Zionist community and the ultra-Orthodox community – each of which have unique characteristics that may influence the rates and ways of seeking help in different ways (Fox et al., 2020; Freund & Band-Winterstein, 2017; Hays & Lincoln, 2017).

The aim of the study was to develop and test a theoretical model, through which perceptual and cultural factors that influence the intention to seek professional psychological help in the religious Zionist and ultra-Orthodox communities could be outlined and explained. The theoretical framework of the study is based upon two main theories: the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen ,1985, 2012), which offers a theoretical model for predicting behavior based on behavioral intention, attitudes, and personal perceptions; and the theory of basic values (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012), which offers a theoretical model that outlines the shared cultural motivations and value preferences of different cultures and the relationships between them (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012). The current research model examined the interrelations among cultural components (cultural motivations) and cognitive components (perceptions and beliefs regarding seeking psychological help), and their influence on individuals’ actual intentions to seek professional psychological help. The research hypotheses addressed the following five aims: 1. Differences between men and women in the intention to seek help; 2. Differences between ultra-Orthodox participants and religious Zionist participants in the intention to seek help; 3. Association between age and intention to seek help; 4. Association between personal attitudes and intention to seek help; 5. The mediating role of personal perceptions in the association between cultural motivations and intention to seek help.

The study consisted of 575 participants, 320 men and 225 women, who were recruited from two populations (two samples) – 299 participants were from the ultra-Orthodox community and 276 participants were from the religious Zionist community. Participants responded to a close-ended questionnaire consisting of several sections: 1. Value preferences and cultural motivations; 2. Planned behavior; 3. Intention to seek help; and 4. Demographics. Participants were recruited by the lead researcher, as well as trained research assistants. Analyses were conducted within several subsamples: an overall sample that included all study participants, both men and women, from both communities; the ultra-Orthodox participants, including both men and women; and the religious Zionist participants, including both men and women. Analyses were further split by gender.

The central findings indicated that: 1. Intention to seek help was significantly higher among women than men in the overall sample and among the religious Zionist participants, but not among those in the ultra-Orthodox sample; 2. There were no differences between the ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist participants in regard to intention to seek help, when comparing across the two overall groups and among the subsample of women. However, ultra-Orthodox men reported a higher intention to seek help than religious Zionist men. 3. There was no association between age and intention to seek help; 4. There was a positive association between personal perceptions (attitudes toward seeking help, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) and intention to seek help; 5. There were associations between most cultural motivation variables (openness to change, self-enhancement, self-transcendence) and intention to seek psychological help. Associations were mediated by personal perceptions (attitudes toward seeking help, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control).

Study findings validated the research model and supported the research hypothesis that cultural motivations would influence personal perceptions which, in turn, would influence the intention to seek help. As such, the current study offers an integrative model, based upon two theoretical models from different fields, and offers an outline of the factors that influence the intention to seek professional psychological help while, at the same time, emphasizing perceptual and cognitive factors, as well as the role of culture and gender. The current research helps in developing a greater understanding of the process of seeking help in different societies and cultures. Further, study findings provide a unique picture of the two research populations – the religious Zionist community and the ultra-Orthodox community. The findings indicate that, although the differences between the two groups were found to be relatively small, they hold research significance in regard to understanding similarities and differences between the two populations. More specifically, the research showed that there is a difference in the influence of cultural motivations and gender on the intention to seek help across the groups, and that intention to seek help was high across all subsamples.

Study findings raise a number of practical implications that may contribute to policy, particularly policies that guide organizations and professionals that provide professional psychological help to the populations included in this research specifically, as well as to different cultural groups in general. First, the study proposes a model upon which an intervention program can be designed that aims to promote the seeking of professional psychological help while, at the same time, emphasizing the cultural and perceptual aspects that influence intention to seek help. In addition, the study demonstrates that adherence to religious and traditional values is consistent with openness to seek help; therefore, it is recommended to encourage and strengthen the cooperation and trust between mental health organizations and professionals and organizations and leaders within the ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist communities. Further, the study showed that a sense of competence, knowledge, and ability in regard to seeking help may prevent help seeking, even when one holds positive attitudes about it. In light of this, it is recommended to streamline bureaucratic processes, improve the accessibility of such services and increase knowledge about how to access services among the target populations. Moreover, the study highlights that men, as a group, tend to seek help at lower rates than women and suggests that self-enhancement, as a cultural-gender factor, may explain this. As such, it is recommended to change the perception of help seeking among men. Thus, the current research reinforces the need for adapting referral services for professional psychological help on the basis of culture and gender, as well tailoring the way in which help seeking is promoted.