RESEARCH QUESTION

What effects do perceptions and sociodemographic influences have on the mental health help-seeking behavior and the utilization of counseling services among college students in the United States?

INTRODUCTION

Mental Illness in College Students

In the United States, 1 in 5 adults, or 43.8 million Americans, experience mental illness every year (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019a). Additionally, 50% of chronic cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and 75% of chronic cases begin by age 24. Suffering from a mental illness, especially during college, may have detrimental effects on students' physical health, mental well-being, and academic success, due to the added stressors of stigma, access to resources, and concern for social acceptance. Research suggests that there are higher levels of psychological distress among university students, compared to their non-university peers, with one study reporting 60% of students with moderate levels of mental distress (Knowlden et al., 2016). In addition, the 2013 National College Health Assessment showed 59.6% of students reporting feelings of sadness, 31.3% reporting feelings of depression, and 51% reporting feelings of anxiety (American College Health Association, 2013).

The prevalence of mental illness among college students of ethnic, racial, or gender minority status is often higher and more persistent than the prevalence among college students of non-minority status. When compared to the general population, African American's are 20% more likely to suffer from serious mental health concerns, primarily major depression, ADHD, suicide, and PTSD (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019b). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals are 2.5 times more likely than heterosexual

individuals to experience substance abuse, depression, and anxiety, and report a higher prevalence of considering suicide (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). Minority students also may suffer from a disproportiantely high burden of disability resulting from mental illness, due to various cultural stressors such as discrimination, lack of cultural competence, and negative stigma concerning mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 2017).

PURPOSE

This paper will focus on social perceptions and sociodemographic factors and how they relate to mental health help-seeking behaviors and service utilization among college students. More specifically, the influence of these factors on the attitudes towards mental illness and treatment-seeking in college students ages 18 to 25.

METHODS

Search Strategy & Data Resources

A literature review was conducted to examine the relationship between perceptions and minority status on the treatment-seeking behaviors of college students (18 to 25) suffering from a mental illness. The CINAHL database in the UGA Galileo Library Database System was used to conduct an organized search for relevant articles. Articles were chosen based on key words and phrases in the abstract, such as "stigma", "college students", "mental health", "perceptions", "service utilization", "minority status", and "help-seeking", and further search results are listed in *Figure 1*. If articles focused on specifc mental illnesses, involved prevention techniques, or were conducted outside of the United States, they were disregarded. The search for literature addressed the following question: What effects do perceptions and minority status have on

mental health help-seeking behavior and the utilization of counseling services among college students?

DISCUSSION

Perceptions of Mental Illness & Help-Seeking

Perceptions surrounding mental illness are often negative, and involve stigma and cultural views on mental health. Students with high perceived stigma from family and friends typically exhibit high self-stigma regarding mental health help-seeking (Jennings et al., 2015). When a students' family and friends portray negative emotions and beliefs about mental illness and treatment, it negatively influences the students' own emotions and beliefs about mental illness and treatment. As a result, these students will choose to forego treatment for their mental health concerns, and suffer emotional, academic, and social consequences. Therefore, it is important for societies to express positivity and acceptance towards mental illness, and provide community support and resources.

Campus culture is also important in the help-seeking behavior of college students with mental health concerns. College campuses with faculty and staff who exhibit positive and supportive beliefs about mental illness and treatment report higher rates of students who utilize combined mental health services (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2016). Since students spend a majority of their time on campus, it is important for colleges to provide an inviting social environment as well as adequate resources for mental health treatment. If students do not feel comfortable in their college environment, they will be less likely to seek treatment for their mental illness. As a result, students may suffer mentally, academically, and socially, as they experience isolation and increased stress.

Sociodemographic Influences & Help-Seeking

The influence of a students' family on their mental health can be detrimental if their family is not supportive of mental illness. African American college students suffering from a mental illness, who experience high perceived negative family norms regarding mental health treatment, often report low intentions of help-seeking (Barksdale & Molock, 2009). In addition, over half of ethnic minority students forego treatment due to fear of how their parents and families will react, implying a strong relationship between family norms and mental health treatment (Miranda et al., 2015). Family values are important in various ethnic cultures, so if students experience negative beliefs about mental illness within their families, they may choose to decline treatment. Therefore, maintaining a positive image of mental illness and treatment within the family will allow the student to feel supported and receive treatment.

Gender identity is a prominent factor that contributes to the help-seeking behavior of college students suffering from a mental illness in the United States. LGBQQ students have a higher likelihood of experiencing more stress and more mental health-related academic impairment than their heterosexual counterparts, which further diminishes the mental health of the LGBQQ population (Dunbar et al., 2017). This is often a result of discrimination, harassment, and negative perceptions of campus climate faced by this population.

Mental Health Service Utilization

College students with mental illnesses often choose informal mental health treatment, such as advice from family and friends, rather than formal mental health treatment. Campuses often do not provide adequate resources for mental health concerns, or the students are not aware of the services provided. These results suggest the increased need for both accessible mental health resources and efficient advertisement of these resources to students on the campus. If

students suffering from a mental illness do not have readily accessible treatment opportunities or support systems, their conditions may worsen and negatively impact their mental health.

LGBQQ college students in need of mental health treatment frequently do not receive proper care, which indicates a high unmet need of mental health resources. These students may be embarrassed about seeking treatment, experience discrimination due to their gender identification, or be uncertain of a need for treatment. Therefore, it is important for LGBQQ students to be accepted among their faculty and peers and made aware of available mental health treatment resources (Dunbar et al., 2017).

African American college students face multiple barriers to accessing campus-provided mental health counseling services. Faced with the stressors associated with being African American or of other ethnic descent has a negative effect on mental health service utilization, because students may feel embarrassed or may fear discrimination in professional health care settings. Lack of cultural competence by medical professionals also contributes to this underutilization of services, in that students will not choose to seek treatment if they are disrespected by their doctor.