The personal service gap: Factors affecting adolescents’ willingness to seek help

Amiram Raviv a,*, Alona Raviv b, Idit Vago-Gefen a, Abby Schachter Fink a

a Department of Psychology, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel
b Department of Statistics and OR, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel

Abstract

The study explores adolescents’ attitudes toward seeking help for emotional problems. The personal service gap is examined by asking adolescents about their willingness to refer themselves and others to formal (psychologists) and informal (friends) help sources, using a within-subjects design. The study included 662 Israeli adolescents in the 10th and 12th grades. The results indicate that adolescents refer peers more than themselves to a psychologist and to a friend. They are also more willing to refer themselves and peers to a friend rather than to a psychologist. Barriers to seeking psychological help are explored and significant correlations between perceptions of psychological benefit, problem severity and barriers to help seeking are described. Recommendations for increasing adolescents’ awareness and use of help sources are suggested.
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Introduction

Adolescence has long been perceived as a period of ‘storm and stress’ (Hall, 1904), characterized by heightened sensitivity and increased volatility. The vulnerability of this age group is in

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: raviv@post.tau.ac.il (A. Raviv).
part due to the wide range of developmental tasks typical of this stage of life, affecting multiple
domains simultaneously (social, cognitive, physical, and emotional). This developmental stage is
further challenged by the occurrence of many psychological disturbances that first manifest during
adolescence (Whitaker, Johnson, & Shaffer, 1990). As such, adolescents represent a high risk
group (Dubow, Lovko, & Kausch, 1990) in need of developmentally-appropriate psychological
support. Unfortunately, many adolescents suffering from emotional difficulties refrain from
seeking professional help (Fallon & Bowles, 2001; Grinstein-Weiss, Fishman, & Eisikovits, 2005;
Sheffield, Fiorenza, & Sofronoff, 2004) with potentially far-reaching implications for long-term
mental health and adult functioning (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996).

The under-use of psychological services and support systems by individuals requiring
psychological help and those who actually seek it has been referred to as the “service gap”
phenomenon (Kushner & Sher, 1991; Stefl & Prosperi, 1985). Over the past few decades,
researchers have attempted to understand this gap and the factors underlying it. Research on
barriers to help-seeking behavior has underlined the role of threat to self-esteem (Amato &
help is often perceived as indicative of personal weakness. As a result, an individual may refrain
from seeking help in order to maintain positive self-esteem. Additional psychological barriers to
seeking psychological help include treatment fearfulness (Kushner & Sher, 1991) and negative
previous help-seeking experiences (Deane & Todd, 1996).

Recently, studies have begun to explore the service gap specifically among adolescent pop-
ulations (e.g., Raviv, Sills, Raviv, & Wilansky, 2000; Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Cirarrochi,
2005; Sheffield et al., 2004; Wilson, Deane, & Cirarrochi, 2005). This has included the development
of specific tools that assess adolescents’ attitudes, intentions toward and actual help-seeking
behavior such as the Barriers to Adolescent Seeking Help questionnaire (BASH, Kuhl, Jarkon-
Horlick, & Morrissey, 1997) and the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ, Wilson,
Deane, Cirarrochi, & Rickwood, 2005). Several studies have found that help-seeking among
adolescents is often inversely related to the degree of distress (Cirarrochi, Deane, Coralie, &
Rickwood, 2002; Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman, & Blum, 1994; Tishby, Turrel, Gumpel, & Pinus,
2001). As a result, those adolescents most in need of psychological help are often those least likely
to receive it. However, there is evidence that for specific and more extreme difficulties (i.e.,
substance abuse, sexual or physical abuse, or health-related matters) adolescents do seek
professional help (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2005; Tishby et al., 2001).

Among adolescents, several significant psychological barriers to seeking help have been found.
These include a perception of the problem as “too personal”, a fear of lack of confidentiality,
a conviction that the problem can be solved independently, a perception that no one can help solve the
problem (Dubow et al., 1990), and suicidal ideation (Carlton & Deane, 2000; Wilson, Deane, &
Cirarrochi, 2005). A further barrier concerns a lack of knowledge regarding existing help sources in the
community (Dubow et al., 1990; Sheffield et al., 2004). Raviv et al. (2000) explored factors inhibiting
adolescents from seeking help from both natural and professional support systems. They compared
help-seeking situations with a greater personal cost to situations with little to no personal cost. They
found a significant disparity between adolescents’ willingness to refer another adolescent for help,
particularly psychological help, and their willingness to refer themselves. In view of these findings,
Raviv et al. (2000) developed the term “personal service gap”, highlighting the disparity between
individuals’ expressed desire to seek help and their actual willingness to seek help for themselves.
In order to further our understanding of factors affecting adolescent’s help-seeking behavior, the current study explores the personal service gap by using a within-subjects design in which the same subject is questioned about psychological help-seeking for him or herself (self-referral) and for another individual (referral of other). This design was selected in order to draw out potentially different sets of cognitions that weigh into an individual’s considerations regarding the most appropriate way to cope with one’s own distress as opposed to that of another. In particular, the study explores a variety of attitudinal and cognitive factors that underlie adolescents’ resistance to seeking professional help. Psychological barriers to help-seeking are examined by means of the Barriers to Adolescent Seeking Help questionnaire (BASH, Kuhl et al., 1997). The BASH, comprised of 13 categories of barriers to help-seeking behavior, directly questions adolescents about their attitudes toward psychological treatment. In addition, the study examines the effect of gender, age and source of help (formal and informal) on adolescents’ help-seeking behavior.

Previous research found that gender is a highly significant factor affecting willingness to seek help (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2005). Among adults, women display greater willingness to seek help than men. So, too, female adolescents report feelings of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation more than their male counterparts. They also express more open attitudes toward seeking and receiving professional help than male adolescents (Leong & Zachar, 1999; Raviv et al., 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996; Tishby et al., 2001). Moreover, girls tend to perceive their problems as more severe than boys. This may partially explain women’s more positive attitudes toward seeking help.

Regarding the effect of age on help-seeking behavior, studies have reported conflicting patterns. Schonert-Reichl and Muller (1996) reported that older adolescents tend to consult professional support sources more than younger adolescents who tended to consult their friends and mothers. However, Boldero and Fallon (1995) found that older adolescents tended to seek help from friends, whereas younger adolescents tended to seek help from family. Rickwood et al. (2005) reported differing developmental trends for male and female Australian adolescents in relation to specific types of help sources. They found that over the high school years girls increasingly turn to friends rather than parents and family and slightly increase their use of formal help sources. Adolescent males, however, seek less help from both formal and informal help sources across the teenage years. In contrast to their female counterparts, the reduction in seeking help from family is not replaced by increased use of friends or professional help.

The above findings highlight the impact of the type of help sources on adolescent help-seeking behavior. In general, teenagers prefer receiving help from informal sources such as parents and friends rather than from formal sources such as teachers, doctors, school counselors, and psychologists (Raviv et al., 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996; Sheffield et al., 2004; Tishby et al., 2001; Zwaanswijk, Verhaak, Bensing, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003). Several reasons may underlie this preference. First, seeking help from informal sources carries with it a lower psychological cost and is likely perceived as less threatening to the self. Second, seeking help from friends and family is likely perceived as a normative act whereas turning toward formal help sources, particularly to psychologists, may be perceived as stigmatic (Wills, 1992). It is also likely that adolescents perceive close others as better able to understand their difficulties and that they will continue to value them despite the exposure of their weakness (Wills, 1992). The preference of friends over other sources of help is in keeping with the growing prominence of the peer group during adolescence in general (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982; Raviv et al., 2000). Furthermore, informal sources of help are more accessible and less expensive than formal ones. In keeping with the above
findings, the current study examines several salient factors affecting help-seeking among adolescents, focusing specifically on the psychological barriers that inhibit this process.

Method

Participants

The participants included 415 10th-grade (200 boys and 215 girls) and 247 12th-grade (104 boys and 143 girls) Jewish Israeli adolescents from four schools in central Israel. Families’ economic backgrounds were middle class ($M = 3.45$, with $3 = \text{average}$ and $4 = \text{just above average economic status}$). Approximately 50% of the participants’ parents had studied beyond high school, in keeping with the Jewish Israeli adult population in the 35–55 age range. Participants came from families with a mean number of 2.9 children, similar to the average of 2.7 in the Jewish Israeli population (CBS, 2005).

Instruments

In order to examine the self-other referral gap participants were asked to read a vignette about a teenager experiencing severe emotional difficulties. They were asked to which help sources (friend and psychologist) they would refer the teenager and the extent to which they would refer the teenager for help. They were also asked the same questions in reference to themselves, imagining that they were experiencing the same difficulties described in the vignette. The hero presented in each vignette was of the same gender as the participant. Half the group was first presented with a vignette describing another teenager (referral of other) and half were first asked questions regarding themselves (self-referral).

Willingness to seek help

The scenario of the distressed adolescent was taken from a study conducted by Raviv et al. (2000) in which the hero’s distress was described as follows: “Until recently [Orit] was an ordinary teenager. During the last few weeks, for no apparent reason, she has become distant, very depressed and does not appear to enjoy anything. Moreover, she has been oversleeping and has lost a great deal of weight.” Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they would be willing to seek help (for themselves or others) from two sources — friend and psychologist — rating their willingness on a scale of 1–4 with 1 indicating definitely would not and 4 indicating definitely would.

Following the Willingness to Seek Help question, participants answered three complementary questions related to the scenario. Responses to these questions in a previous study (Raviv et al., 2000) demonstrated high correlations between responses to self-referral and referral of other, reflecting good reliability for the single-question variables.

Coping alone

In the referral of other versions adolescents were either asked how worthwhile it would be for the hero to handle his or her problem alone without seeking help. In the self-referral version, they
were asked the same question in reference to themselves given they had a similar problem. Responses ranged from 1 (definitely not worthwhile) to 5 (definitely worthwhile).

Psychological benefit
In both the self and referral of other versions, adolescents were asked the extent to which they thought the hero would gain or lose from seeking advice from a psychologist. Answers ranged from 1 (lose to a great extent) to 5 (gain to a great extent).

Problem severity
In both versions, adolescents were asked to rate the severity of the hero’s problem, ranging from 1 (very minor) to 5 (very severe).

In addition, subjects were asked to respond to three additional questions unrelated to the specific scenario.

Comparative coping
Adolescents were asked about the extent to which they feel they would be able to cope with problems similar to those of the hero as compared to their average classmate. Answers ranged on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1, indicating well below average, to 5, indicating well above average. This question was asked following the presentation of the second scenario (self or other, depending on order of presentation).

History of help-seeking behavior
Adolescents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had previously sought help from a psychologist on a 5-point scale in which 0 indicated never, 1 indicated once, 2 indicated twice, 3 indicated 3 times or more for short-term counseling, and 4 indicated long-term counseling (for a few weeks or more).

Satisfaction with past counseling
If they had sought help from the a psychologist in the past, adolescents were asked to indicate the extent to which they were satisfied with the service they received on a 4-point scale ranged from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 4 (very satisfied).

Barriers to adolescents seeking help (BASH)
The authors translated into Hebrew the BASH questionnaire, designed by Kuhl et al. (1997), for measuring barriers to help-seeking behavior in adolescents. Following a pilot study, we changed the original word ‘therapist’ to ‘psychologist’, given that the term psychologist is more familiar to Israeli adolescents. Two items were omitted later due to low reliability, reducing the instrument to 35-items. Test–retest reliability, computed on 54 adolescents with a time interval of two weeks, gave \( r = .65 \), and Cronbach’s alpha on the final version was .89. Participants were asked to indicate their extent of agreement, on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Five of the questions were reversed, in order that higher scores indicate higher barriers.

Procedure
The authors received permission from the Ministry of Education, headmasters and parents before conducting the study. Students were informed that the study was anonymous and optional
(all agreed to participate in the study). During their homeroom period, participants received randomly one of the two questionnaire scenarios (self or other). They were told that the questionnaires dealt with adolescents’ help-seeking behavior. First, the participants answered the Willingness to seek help question (self or other) followed by the three complementary questions related to the scenario (Coping alone, psychological benefit, and problem severity). They then completed a set of demographic questions. After their completion, they were then presented with the second scenario, and the related questions. Finally, they answered the three additional questions unrelated to the scenario (Comparative coping, History of help-seeking behavior, and Satisfaction with past counseling) and the BASH questionnaire. Each participant received a code number in order to identify the two parts of the questionnaires. Due to time limitations, only 509 adolescents were able to complete the BASH instrument. After completion, adolescents were debriefed as to the goals of the study.

Results

Willingness to seek help

Although the questionnaires were randomly distributed, the background variables (i.e., parents’ education, marital status, economical status, and number of children in the family) were analyzed for differences between versions. No significant difference was found between versions with respect to these variables. Since the hero’s gender did not yield any effect, we ignored this variable in all following analyses.

The different order in which the referral scenarios were presented was used to balance possible mutual effects on the participant’s responses. However, we examined the different questionnaires to see whether and to what extent the different order affected the results.

Help-seeking from sources

A $(2 \times 2) \times (2 \times 2) \times 2$ MANOVA with Source of help (friend, psychologist) and referral (self, other) as within-subject variables, and Gender, Class and Order of questionnaires (Q1 = self-referral first, Q2 = referral of other first) as between-subject variables yielded main effects for order, $F(1,654)=10.83, p < .01$, gender, $F(1,654)=20.14, p < .01$ (girls more than boys), referral, $F(1,654)=150.45, p < .01$ (other more than self), and source of help, $F(1,654)=783.35, p < .01$ (friend more than psychologist). They also yielded 2-way interactions of class by source, $F(1,654)=7.15, p < .01$, and referral by source, $F(1,654)=63.27, p < .01$, and a 3-way interaction of gender by referral by source, $F(1,654)=6.53, p < .05$. The interactions found between source and other variables called for analyses for each source separately.

Friend

Regarding help-seeking from a friend, main effects of gender, $F(1,654)=20.46, p < .01$, class, $F(1,654)=20.68, p < .01$, and referral, $F(1,654)=16.45, p < .01$, were found. Girls are more willing than boys to refer themselves or others to friends (see means in Table 1); 12th-grade adolescents are more willing to refer themselves or others than 10th graders (for self-referral the means and SDs are $M = 3.18, 3.42, SD = 0.86, 0.71$, for 10th-grade and 12th grade, respectively,
and for referral of other $M = 3.28, 3.65$, $SD = 0.82, 0.65$, respectively); in addition, adolescents tend to refer others to a friend for help more often than themselves. The means are presented in Table 1. The order of the questions had no effect on the responses regarding seeking help from a friend. Nevertheless, there was a high correlation between self-referral and referral of other intentions to a friend, $r(662) = .69$, $p < .001$.

Psychologist

Regarding help-seeking from a psychologist, a main effect of referral was found, $F(1,654) = 179.22, p < .01$, with self-referral lower than referral of other responses (Table 1). A main effect of order was also found, $F(1,654) = 11.05, p < .01$, in which the responses to Q2 (where the other version appears first) are higher than the responses to Q1 (where the self-version appears first), for both self-referral and referral of other (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). Analyses of the interaction between Gender and Referral, $F(1,654) = 4.94, p < .05$, show no difference between boys and girls in regard to self-referral, while responses to referral of other are higher for girls than for boys. Comparisons of self-referral versus referral of other versions show that among boys and girls, adolescents are most likely to refer others than themselves to a psychologist. As in the case of referral to a friend, there was also a high correlation between self-referral and referral of other versions, $r(662) = .65, p < .001$ for a psychologist.

Comparison of help sources

Table 1 presents the means of help seeking from the two sources of help, for boys and girls. Post-hoc comparisons between sources’ means show that among boys and girls, both in the self-referral and the referral of other versions, adolescents tend to refer themselves or others to a friend more often than to a psychologist. Correlations between help-seeking from a psychologist and a friend were very small and not significant.

The personal service gap

The personal service gap was measured for each participant by the difference between responses to referral of other and self-referral scenarios. An overall MANOVA was performed on the measures of service gap for the two sources of help, with Order of question, Gender and Class as between-subject variables. Results show a main effect of source, $F(1,654) = 63.27, p < .01$, with a higher gap for a psychologist than for a friend (see Table 1). We also found a gender by source interaction, $F(1,654) = 6.53, p < .05$. Post-hoc comparisons show that for both boys and girls, service gaps are higher for a psychologist than for a friend. We found no significant difference between the service gaps for boys and girls in regard to friend or a psychologist. The interaction is due to the fact that differences in gaps regarding psychologist and friend are higher for girls than for boys.

Complementary questions related to the scenarios

Three additional variables were explored in relation to the two scenarios (self-referral and referral of other versions): (1) coping alone, (2) psychological benefit, and (3) problem severity.
Table 1

Means and standard deviations of willingness to seek help from sources and service gaps by gender, referral and order of questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-referral first (n = 336)</th>
<th>Referral of other first (n = 326)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-referral (^a)</td>
<td>Referral of other (^b)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td><strong>Friend</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychologist</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Friend service gap(^c)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>(0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>(0.60)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psychologist service gap(^c)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) First question.
\(^b\) Second question.
\(^c\) Service gap = referral of other − self-referral.
Means of these variables are presented in Table 2. Regarding coping alone, adolescents feel they can cope better than others can, $F(1,654) = 160.51, p < .01$, and boys think adolescents can cope better (themselves or others) than girls think they can, $F(1,654) = 43.80, p < .01$. In addition, coping alone responses to the first questionnaire were higher than to the second one. Regarding psychological benefit, the participants’ responses to others were higher than to themselves, $F(1,654) = 32.99, p < .01$, with an interaction, $F(1,654) = 6.75, p < .01$, indicating that the difference between versions is higher in the second questionnaire than in the first. Regarding perceived severity, adolescents perceive the problem as quite severe (Table 2), with girls perceiving it as more severe than boys, $F(1,654) = 6.66, p < .01$.

Means of comparative coping are 3.56 (SD = 0.84) for girls and 3.86 (SD = 0.85) for boys, showing high scores for both boys and girls. A comparison of this variable’s scores to the expected middle score of 3 (“similar to the average”) showed that boys and girls scored higher than the middle score, $t(352) = 12.40$ and $t(301) = 17.48$ for girls and boys, with $p < .001$ for both. Comparisons between groups showed that comparative coping for boys is significantly higher than for girls, $F(1,651) = 19.72, p < .01$, and higher for older adolescents than for younger ones, $F(1,651) = 3.99, p < .05$.

**History of help-seeking behavior**

One hundred and fifty participants (22.8%) had previously approached a psychologist for help. Weak relations (Spearman correlations) were found between willingness to seek help from a psychologist and the extent to which the participants approached a psychologist in the past, $r_s(659) = .17, p < .01$ for self-referral and $r_s(659) = .18, p < .01$, for referral of other. Higher correlations were found with satisfaction from the psychologist in the past, $r_s(146) = .38, p < .01$ for self-referral and $r_s(146) = .32, p < .01$, for referral of other (Spearman correlations were used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Means and standard deviations of complementary questions related to the scenarios by gender, referral and order of questions.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-referral first (n = 336)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-referral$^b$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coping alone</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>2.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3.39</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological benefit</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>3.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3.57</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Problem severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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</table>

$^a$ First question.  
$^b$ Second question.
in accordance with the ordinal nature of the variable scoring). Comparing willingness to seek help from a psychologist among those who sought help from a psychologist in the past and those who had not, resulted in the following: \( t(657) = 4.82, p < .001 \) for self-referral, and \( t(657) = 4.86, p < .001 \) for referral of other. In both cases, willingness to seek help from a psychologist was greater in the group that had previously sought help from a psychologist (means are 1.85, 2.27 for the self-referral version and 2.24, 2.65 for the referral of other version).

**Relationship between willingness to seek help from sources and the other research variables**

The Pearson correlations between the above variables and willingness to seek help from a friend and from a psychologist are presented in Table 3. Help-seeking intentions (for both the self-referral and referral of other versions) from a psychologist is positively correlated with problem severity and the benefit of psychological help; they are negatively correlated with coping alone.

**The Barriers Questionnaire (BASH)**

In general, the participants had a positive attitude toward psychological help. The overall BASH mean was 2.85, on a 1–6 point scale, with high scores reflecting greater resistance to help seeking. The BASH scores are higher for boys \((M = 3.00, SD = 0.60)\) than for girls \((M = 2.72, SD = 0.63)\), \(F(1,504) = 24.45, p < .01\), with no differences between the age groups. The correlations between BASH scores and help-seeking intentions are presented in Table 3, and the correlations between BASH scores and the variables related to the scenarios are presented in Table 4. Table 3 demonstrates that seeking help from a friend has very few and low correlations with the research variables. In contrast, help-seeking from a psychologist correlates negatively with the BASH score. In both the self-referral and referral of other versions, the BASH score positively correlates with coping alone, and negatively correlates with psychological benefit (see Table 4). Comparative coping seems to be a separate domain, with almost no relationship to the other research variables (Table 4).

In order to further examine the relationship between willingness to seek help (for self or other) and the other research variables, we used regressions predicting help-seeking from a friend and from a psychologist. First, we used all background variables as predictors, as well as the three complementary questions related to the scenarios (coping alone, psychological benefit and problem severity), comparative coping, and the BASH score. Since neither parents’ level of

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<th>Self-referral</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping alone</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological benefit</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.51**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem severity</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.24**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparative coping</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BASH score</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
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education nor economic status of the family had significant effects in any of the regressions, we conducted the further analyses using only gender and class as background variables. The regressions predicting help-seeking from a friend and from a psychologist and service gaps were conducted hierarchically: in the first stage, the background variables were forced into the regression. All other variables were entered at the second stage. Results of help-seeking from a psychologist are presented in Table 5.

Regarding seeking help from a friend, after controlling for gender and class, self-referral was related only to coping alone (positively); referral of other to a friend and friend service gap did not show a significant effect of research variables after controlling for gender and class. Regarding help-seeking from a psychologist, the regressions show (Table 5) that both self-referral and referral of other to a psychologist are higher when psychological benefit and severity are high and BASH score and comparative coping are low. Hence, adolescents who are less resistant to psychologists, and who have low comparative coping, tend to seek help from a psychologist to

Table 4
Pearson intercorrelations between all complementary variables.

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<th>1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Comparative coping</td>
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<td>2. BASH</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-referral

|        | 3   | 4   | 5   |     |     |     |     |
|        | .13** | .30** | –   |     |     |     |     |

Referral of other

|        | 6   | 7   | 8   |     |     |     |     |
|        | .07 | .26** | .58** | –.16** | –.19** | –   |     |

Table 5
Hierarchical regressions predicting willingness to seek help from a psychologist by background variable and other research variables (N = 662).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Self-referral</th>
<th>Referral of other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.000</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping alone</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>-.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological benefit</td>
<td>.247</td>
<td>5.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem severity</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>2.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASH</td>
<td>-.189</td>
<td>-4.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative coping</td>
<td>-.107</td>
<td>-2.53*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For predicting self-referral or referral of other willingness to seek help we used either self-referral or referral of other responses of the three complementary variables related to the scenarios, respectively. ΔR² is the additional proportion of variance accounted for the variables at each step.

*p < .05.  **p < .01.
a higher degree. In addition, perceiving psychological help as beneficial and perceived problem severity correlate positively with help-seeking for self and other. The effects given here are after gender and age group are controlled for. Regarding the service gap in help-seeking from a psychologist (Table 6), the regression equation shows that it depends positively on the difference between psychological benefit for other and self, and depends negatively on the difference between coping alone for other and self.

Discussion

Studies on help-seeking among adolescents demonstrate the under-use of formal and professional sources of support. This has worrisome implications for both immediate and long-term development. The current study explores adolescents’ attitudes toward help sources in order to further our understanding of the factors that affect adolescent help-seeking behavior. In the current study, adolescents demonstrated the ability to identify the severity of emotional disturbance and recognize the need for psychological help when asked hypothetically about a distressed individual. However, despite these abilities and a generally positive attitude toward psychological help, as demonstrated by their BASH scores (2.86 on a scale of 1—6), the study found a significant gap between the subjects’ hypothetical willingness to refer a distressed peer for help as opposed to themselves. Through the use of the within-subject design, the study helps to tease out some of the cognitions and beliefs that affect an adolescent’s considerations regarding formal help-seeking.

A central finding of the current study is that despite the perceived benefit of seeking help from a psychologist, adolescents prefer to cope with problems on their own. The personal service gap regarding seeking help from a psychologist was found to be dependent on the perceived difference between the self and the other’s ability to cope alone and on the difference regarding the potential benefits associated with seeking help. These findings highlight the possible influences of self-relational biases (Brown, 1986; Hoorens, 1993) on the service gap phenomenon.

Self-relational biases refer to the distortions in self-perception that lead individuals to see themselves in a more positive manner, based on the need for self-enhancement. In keeping with this approach, the current study explored the concept of illusory superiority in which individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.103</td>
<td>-2.34*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping alone (self)</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>1.99*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping alone (other)</td>
<td>-.173</td>
<td>-3.07**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological benefit (self)</td>
<td>-.129</td>
<td>-2.10*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological benefit (other)</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>4.27**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem severity (self)</td>
<td>-.102</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem severity (other)</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASH</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative coping</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>0.067</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
tend to appraise their positive characteristics as relatively greater than, and their negative qualities
as relatively lower than, those of the average individual (Brown, 1986). Indeed, the participants in
the study demonstrated illusory superiority regarding their ability to cope with problems in
comparison to other students in their class. The study also found that illusory superiority
contributes negatively to the prediction of self-referral and referral of other to a psychologist.
These findings support the notion that distortions in self-perceptions influence an individual's
willingness to make use of psychological services. Under the influence of these distortions,
adolescents tend to minimize their need for help in contrast to others with similar problems and to
perceive their ability to cope alone as better than that of other individuals.

Individuals who think they can cope alone are less likely to perceive referral to a psychologist as
a beneficial course of action. Indeed, the study found negative correlations between perceived
coping alone and willingness to seek help. In addition, the study found a positive correlation
between coping alone and barriers to seeking psychological help. When both coping alone and
BASH variables were entered into a regression analysis, only the BASH scores significantly
predicted help-seeking (and not coping alone), because of their higher correlation with help-
seeking. Male subjects placed greater value on coping alone than female adolescents. This
corroborates Mitchell’s (1987) study which found that men perceive themselves as better able than
women to cope on their own with problematic situations.

Several additional factors were found to affect adolescents’ attitudes toward help-seeking
behavior. A primary variable affecting adolescents’ willingness to seek help relates to the type of
help source. Among adolescents willingness to refer oneself or another to a friend was significantly
higher than to a psychologist. This is in keeping with findings demonstrating that friends represent
a natural, important and acceptable support source for adolescents (Boldero & Fallon, 1995;
Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). The rate of seeking help from a friend for oneself was still
somewhat lower than the rate at which adolescents were willing to refer others to a friend further
highlighting the role of self-relational biases. Even in relation to a less threatening help source,
adolescents tend to perceive the other as in greater need of help than their selves.

An additional variable affecting attitudes toward help-seeking behavior relates to previous
professional contact with a psychologist. The study found a significant (although weak) positive
correlation between previous professional contact with a psychologist and willingness to refer self
or other. Although it is possible that individuals with positive attitudes toward psychologists are
more likely to have sought professional help in the past, it is important to note that satisfaction
with previous professional contact was positively correlated with willingness to refer self and other
to psychologists. Thus, it is not experience alone that affects willingness to seek help, but rather
the degree of satisfaction with previous professional contacts (Kuhl et al., 1997; Sheffield et al.,
2004; Zwaanswijk et al., 2003).

Problem severity also related to willingness to seek help for self or to refer another to
a psychologist, although not to a friend. Participants rated the severity of the presenting problem
as moderate to severe (3.51 on a 1–5 scale). This is in keeping with previous research that found
that the more serious the problem, the greater the rate of referral to professional sources of
support, specifically to psychologists (Raviv et al., 2000; Zwaanswijk et al., 2003). The study
found a positive correlation between problem severity and potential gain or benefit from
psychological help. In addition, a negative correlation was found between problem severity and
the perceived value of coping alone with the problem. These findings indicate that when
adolescents are faced with problems which they perceive to be severe, they display responsibility, and understand the risk of trying to cope alone and the value of seeking psychological help. In particular, girls tend to perceive problems as more severe than boys.

In keeping with previous research (Gonzalez, Algeria, & Prihoda, 2005; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996; Tishby et al., 2001), female adolescents displayed greater willingness to seek help than their male counterparts. In fact gender differences were evident with regard to many of the research variables. The current findings underscores that gender differences in help-seeking are influenced by the source of help and by whether help is sought for self or other. As in previous studies (e.g., Kiraly, 2000; Raviv et al., 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996), girls showed a greater willingness than boys to seek help from a friend for themselves and to refer another. However, with respect to seeking help from a psychologist, no gender differences were found regarding self-referral, although girls were more willing than boys to refer others to a psychologist. It is possible that the similarity between boys and girls with regard to self-referral to a psychologist is related to the hypothetical nature of the question. Perhaps greater differences between boys and girls would emerge with regard to actual help-seeking behavior as opposed to a hypothetical declaration of one's intentions. Indeed, the results of the BASH questionnaire indicate that girls report fewer reservations to seeking help than their male peers.

At first glance it is somewhat unexpected that the personal service gap is larger for girls than boys, given their more positive attitude toward therapy. However, a closer look at the components affecting this gap shows that girls refer others more than boys, regardless of the source of help. Perhaps, the personal service gap among girls is related to a greater sense of empathy and sensitivity toward others alongside increased anxiety and worry (Courtney, 2000; Tatar, 2005; Wills, 1992). This finding, also reported by Raviv et al. (2000), suggests that the personal service gap among boys and girls may stem from different mechanisms.

In contrast to other research (Rickwood et al., 2005), the study did not find age to affect help-seeking attitudes. However, this is likely due to the relatively small age range (two-year age gap) among the subjects. Older students (12th grade) did display greater willingness to seek help from a friend for both self and other than younger students (10th grade). Perhaps 12th-grade students displayed greater willingness to seek help from friends because they spend more time with their peers than 10th-grade students (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Tishby et al., 2001). Moreover, it is likely that the older students had developed more significant social ties than their younger counterparts.

Before turning to the study’s conclusions, an important methodological issue needs to be addressed. The current study employed a within-subjects paradigm in order to underscore the personal service gap. The study found that the order in which the self-referral and referral of other vignettes was presented had a significant effect on the participants’ responses. Indeed, adolescents’ willingness to seek help (for self or other) from a psychologist was greater when the referral of other vignettes was presented first. The results seem to indicate that the most influential factor affecting willingness to seek help was whether the referral was self or other-related. Adolescents evaluated their own willingness to seek help as being relatively low, indicating a rather high help-seeking baseline. In contrast, referring someone else to psychological help does not involve a threat to self, possibly creating a lower help-seeking baseline. It is possible, therefore, that when the referral of other vignette was presented first, participants were freed from factors related to self-esteem which, in turn, raised their willingness to refer themselves to professional help.
Conclusions

The findings of the current study replicate previous research regarding the existence of a personal service gap among adolescents. The participants’ attitudes toward seeking help underscore the fact that, indeed, many adolescents who could benefit from psychological assistance are unlikely to seek out this form of help. This is true for both male and female adolescents despite girls’ more positive attitudes toward seeking help and their higher rates of actual help-seeking behavior. Given that both genders evidenced a personal service gap it seems likely that many adolescents, regardless of gender, do not receive the professional help they need.

However, given the hypothetical nature of the vignettes and the normal population among which the study was conducted, it is difficult to generalize the results of the study to distressed adolescent populations suffering from actual problems. Clearly, there is a need for additional studies to investigate actual help-seeking behavior among real populations in need of therapy. Future large scale studies among different adolescent populations may also highlight the impact of cultural and ethnic factors on help-seeking behavior (i.e., Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2005; Rickwood et al., 2005).

A further limitation concerns the use of single-item measures in the study. Although most of the study’s constructs were operationalized in terms of single-item instruments, the questions used in the study had been previously employed in other studies (Raviv et al., 2000). Moreover, the single-item questions were found to have relatively high correlations with additional variables related to help-seeking. In addition, the single-item measures demonstrated high correlations with the BASH questionnaire which is a multiple-item instrument.

Despite these limitations, the current study furthers our understanding of potential factors affecting distressed adolescents’ help-seeking behavior. In particular, the perception of one’s ability to cope alone stands out as a particularly relevant aspect of self-esteem affecting attitudes toward seeking psychological help. The study found two predictors of the personal service gap: (1) the gap between an individual’s perception of his or her own ability to cope as compared to someone else; (2) the gap between the perceived benefit of self-referral versus referral of other to a psychologist. These findings underscore the need to focus on specific facets of self-esteem pertinent to the particular domains under investigation rather than general measures of self-esteem. Previous studies tended to focus on threat to self-esteem (Nadler, 1991) as the most salient negative factor associated with referral to professional help. The findings of the current study highlight the relative or comparative nature of sense of self among adolescents, specifically with regard to the degree to which an individual perceives his or her ability to cope alone with emotional difficulties. One’s perceived ability to cope alone may represent a more specific aspect of self-esteem that is aroused and taken into account when an individual is faced with the need for emotional support.

On a practical level, this finding suggests that psychological interventions targeting adolescents should increase awareness towards their cognitions related to seeking psychological help. Specifically, interventions should focus on the ways in which certain attitudes and beliefs, particularly one’s perceived ability to cope alone, may become an obstacle to seeking appropriate help. In addition, interventions need to increase adolescents’ awareness of the benefits of psychological assistance as well as their knowledge of existing help services. Given that adolescents are willing to refer friends to formal help sources, and represent an important source of
support for each other, they can potentially play an important role in helping distressed friends seek appropriate professional assistance. Indeed adolescent intervention programs (Kalafat & Elias, 1994) have demonstrated their ability to increase adolescents’ awareness of emotional distress among their peers and encourage a more positive attitude toward seeking help. Interventions focusing on the above themes have the potential to help adolescents play an important role in narrowing the service gap and thereby increase the number of distressed peers receiving appropriate professional help.

References


