



Review

What do help-seeking measures assess? Building a conceptualization framework for help-seeking intentions through a systematic review of measure content



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We used a novel method for conceptualizing a psychological construct.
- We propose a new definition and conceptualization of help-seeking intentions.
- Both the proposed definition and conceptualization are based on expert opinion.
- Previous measures of help-seeking intentions are incomplete.
- The new conceptualization can guide development of stronger measures in this field.

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ABSTRACT

Mental health services are underutilised by people who could benefit from treatment. Research into help-seeking intentions (HSI) is required to support interventions to increase service use. Existing HSI measures are not psychometrically robust and problems with content validity undermine research in this field. Our purpose was to create a clear conceptualization of HSI and systematically review the content of existing measures. Previous researchers had defined help-seeking and intentions separately, so the first step was to create a more comprehensive definition.

Seven theoretical perspectives identified in the HSI literature were mapped onto the new definition and aggregated to form a conceptual framework that reflects expert opinion. This framework guided an analysis of item relevance and a comparison of completeness across measures. Most individual items (99.1%) were relevant, lending credibility to the proposed framework. However, no measure provided a complete assessment of the HSI construct. This study used a novel methodology to develop a definition and conceptual framework, both of which reflect sound theoretical perspectives and represent the consensus-view of experts. The current results will guide the development of stronger measures with improved construct validity and will support interventions aimed at improving help-seeking.

1. Introduction

Uptake of professional services is much lower than mental illness prevalence rates, even when psychological treatments with demonstrated efficacy are available and affordable (Codony et al., 2009; Demyttenaere et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2007). Research into help-seeking tendencies supports the development and evaluation of interventions to increase service utilization and reduce the impact of mental illness at an individual and a community level. The utility of such research is highly dependent on the quality of assessment tools used (Rust & Golombok, 2009) and problems with the existing help-seeking

measures are hindering progress in this field (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). A recent review applied an internationally recognised system for evaluating the evidence base of health-related assessment measures (the Consensus-Based Standards for the Selection of Health Measurement Instruments (COSMIN)) (Mokkink et al., 2010; Terwee et al., 2012) to existing measures of help-seeking intentions (HSI) (White, Clough & Casey, 2017). This study revealed that insufficient attention has been given to the content validity of HSI measures. Existing measures have poor theoretical grounding and reflect a lack of consensus among professionals regarding construct definition. These problems lead to weak conceptualization and inadequate justification for the

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selection of items in assessment measures. The aim of the present study was to use assessment literature to develop a theory-driven conceptualization of HSI that represents the consensus-view of experts. The validity of this conceptualization was tested with an item-level analysis of the content within HSI measures. The results facilitate comparison of instruments to help researchers evaluate validity, select appropriate tools and interpret results.

1.1. Content validity

Problems in establishing and reporting content validity undermine the quality of existing HSI measures (White et al., 2017). Of 46 articles (relating to 25 measures) included in White et al.'s review, only 15 (relating to 14 measures) addressed content validity. When the COSMIN four-point rating system (poor, fair, good, excellent) was applied, nine of the 15 were categorised as poor and six as fair. Content validity relates to the relevance of test items within a measure and to how well the whole measure covers all aspects of the construct (Haynes, Richard, & Kubany, 1995). These features underpin confidence in a tool and are necessary for meaningful interpretation of empirical results (Lynn, 1986). Although content validity can be more difficult to demonstrate than other forms of validity, it is central to the purpose and outcomes of empirical research processes.

Many researchers measure intentions as an estimate of future help-seeking, rather than study actual help-seeking behavior (Conner & Sparks, 2005). Holding an intention to seek help can be distinguished from the steps taken to implement that intention. This distinction between intention and implementation supports proactive interventions which build a foundation for help-seeking before the need arises. If need does emerge, a prompt response can prevent distress intensifying to levels that, paradoxically, impede formal (Carlton & Deane, 2000) and informal help-seeking (Frost, Casey, & O'Gorman, 2016). The assessment of abstract constructs is more subjective, so establishing content validity can be more difficult when anticipating behavior than when observing behavior (McIntire & Miller, 2007). The need to justify the relevance and representativeness of such measures is important. Accordingly, the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing includes content validity as an important recommendation for demonstrating the quality of an assessment instrument (Cook, Zendejas, Hamstra, Hatala, & Brydges, 2014).

1.2. Construct conceptualization

Construct conceptualization is central to designing a measure and demonstrating content validity. The understanding of an intangible factor can be demonstrated via construct definition (Haynes et al., 1995) and theoretical grounding (Domino & Domino, 2006). Construct definition specifies the behavior or trait to be assessed, which sets the initial direction for a measurement tool and establishes the parameters for relevance. Theories are generally broader, explaining how a construct emerges and operates. Thus, theory often determines subtopics and associated factors to be addressed to ensure the construct is fully represented and the measurement tool is comprehensive. When construct definition and sound theory shape test items, validation processes can be implemented with confidence (McIntire et al., 2007). Statistical methods such as exploratory factor analysis and item response analyses, which help to refine and explain a measure, cannot compensate for flaws in conceptualization and are only meaningful if the theoretical premises underpinning the measure are trusted (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). As well as underpinning the development of new measures, clear conceptualization facilitates comparison between existing measures.

In conceptualizing a construct, it is imperative that researchers do not simply rely on their own interpretation, but rather, seek to reflect the consensus-view of experts. Failing to take account of expert opinion leads to subjective decision-making and interpretation of results, which

is vulnerable to personal bias. Sometimes, the consensus-view is well-established and researchers can readily identify a generally accepted definition and theoretical perspective. However, no such agreement exists regarding the assessment of HSI. Where no consensus exists, greater effort should be made to understand the opinions of experts and to use these opinions to shape conceptual understanding.

1.3. Establishing consensus-view

Two common methods for developing an understanding of a topic are grounded theory and Delphi studies. To date, neither method has been applied to the measurement of HSI. Grounded theory uses data from experienced and lay people to develop broad conceptual understanding in an emerging field where little professional knowledge is available (Fassinger, 2005). The data drives all aspects of a study's output, including the type and substance of conclusions generated, which is ideal for newly emerging fields where the research is exploratory and research questions open-ended (Ponterotto, 2010). In contrast to grounded theory, Delphi studies narrow the scope of a topic by using an iterative process to identify agreement between experts and exclude concepts that generate disagreement (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007). The advantages of the Delphi approach include its reliance on expert knowledge and the transparent, quantitative processes which increase objectivity.

Despite their advantages, grounded theory and Delphi studies have limited applicability in the current context. HSI assessment literature provides access to considerable expert knowledge, so methods used in emerging fields may be less relevant. Furthermore, given this project's targeted purpose, namely, to compare the content of existing measures, the open-ended nature of grounded theory is not suitable. For Delphi studies, recruiting and retaining a representative panel of experts can be difficult (Hannes, Heyvaert, Slegers, Vandenbrande, & Van Nuland, 2015). Also, the Delphi process of excluding items with less support is not consistent with the aim of this study to compare all content across measures.

An alternative means of accessing expert opinions is via academic literature. Experts are often identified as such because of their contribution to a particular field of scientific knowledge through the publication of peer-reviewed research. The process of collating peer-reviewed publications is a key aspect of modern research practices and ensures a firm foundation for advancements within a field. The developers of published instruments are experts in the field of help-seeking assessment, whose professional knowledge can be accessed via the peer-reviewed articles presenting their measures. This assessment literature can be analysed to identify the construct definitions and theories that these experts regard as relevant to the assessment of future help-seeking.

Expert opinion from published literature can be aggregated into a framework against which all measures and individual items can be evaluated. Developing a framework to guide the comparative evaluation of content across measures reflects the 'table of specifications' recommended to guide the development of new instruments (Domino & Domino, 2006; Lynn, 1986). The purpose of both is to specify aspects of the construct to be assessed. The table of specifications provides a plan for a single new measure, whereas an aggregated framework can retrospectively summarise all topics and subtopics relevant to existing measures. Single measures can then be assessed for how relevant their individual items are to the framework and how well the measure as a whole represents the concepts within the framework. This can add structure and consistency to evaluation process and facilitate meaningful comparison between measures. Item-level analysis can also serve as a mechanism for checking the accuracy of the framework itself, with a high proportion of relevant items indicating that the views of experts are well-represented. Conversely, irrelevant items would reflect developers' perceptions of help-seeking that extend beyond the conceptualization contained within the framework.

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