



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Correlating educational attainment, attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy, and willingness to seek mental health treatment among Iraqi refugees

Joseph K. Mandwee *

Department of Psychology, School of Social Science, University of Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

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Abstract

Background: Because of the highly limited nature of research on Arabs and refugees in general, no previous effort to correlate educational attainment, attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy, and willingness to seek treatment among Iraqi refugees exists.

Aims: The purpose of this study was to correlate level of educational attainment, attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy, and willingness to seek mental health treatment among a small, voluntary, convenience sample of Iraqi refugees.

Methods: This online study followed a non-experimental, correlational research design for the purpose of collecting descriptive statistics utilizing a survey method. The data was properly categorized along the independent and dependent variables and statistically analyzed using Pearson's r correlations.

Results & Conclusions: Among the surveyed participants, no statistically significant difference could be established in either attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy or willingness to seek treatment based on gender or location. There was an almost negligible, positive association between age and level of educational attainment. As expected in alignment with previous research, level of educational attainment among the Iraqi refugee participants positively correlated with attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy (although not as robustly with willingness to seek treatment), and regardless of age for both variables. Ultimately, more positive attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy were also associated with a higher level of willingness to seek treatment.

Keywords: Iraqi Refugees; Educational Attainment; Attitudes Towards Seeking Psychotherapy; Willingness to Seek Mental Health Treatment; Attitudes Towards Mental Health

1. Introduction

Among Europeans, more positive attitudes towards mental health care have been found to significantly predict the usage of psychotherapeutic services (Bonabi et al., 2016). In New Zealand, attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy were found to be highly predictable along the variables of sex, education level, etc., with more positive attitudes among women and people with higher levels of education (Surgenor, 1985). A previous study had also concluded that people with higher levels of education, regardless of age, generally have more positive attitudes towards seeking psychological help (Fischer & Cohen, 1972). Like most other research in the field of mental health, these studies focused on Western populations. The purpose of the current study was to determine if these previous findings can also extend to a small sample of Iraqi refugees. Because of the highly limited nature of research on Arabs and refugees in general, no previous

* Corresponding author: Joseph Mandwee

effort to correlate educational attainment, attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy, and willingness to seek treatment among Iraqi refugees exists.

Aims

This correlational study had three aims: first, to determine if there is an association between educational attainment and attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy among a small, voluntary sample of Iraqi refugees. Second, to determine if there is an association between educational attainment and willingness to seek mental health treatment. Third, to determine if there is an association between attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy and willingness to seek mental health treatment among this same sample.

Variables

This correlational study had three variables: the independent variable is level of educational attainment among the small sample of Iraqi refugees, and the two dependent variables are attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy, as quantified and measured by the adapted, short form of the *Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale*, and willingness to seek psychological help in response to specific mental health symptoms or issues, as quantified and measured by a symptom-specific scale, respectively. The second part of the study attempted to correlate these two dependent variables.

Questions

- What is the association between level of educational attainment and attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy among a small, voluntary sample of Iraqi refugees?
- What is the association between level of educational attainment and willingness to seek mental health treatment among a small, voluntary sample of Iraqi refugees?
- What is the association between attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy and willingness to seek treatment among a small, voluntary sample of Iraqi refugees?

2. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses correspond to the three research questions above and are in line with the findings of previous research on Western samples:

- Level of educational attainment will positively correlate with Iraqi refugee attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy.
- Level of educational attainment will positively correlate with Iraqi refugee willingness to seek mental health treatment.
- Iraqi refugee attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy will positively correlate with willingness to seek mental health treatment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

This study followed a non-experimental, correlational research design for the purpose of collecting descriptive statistics utilizing a survey method. Research participants were not subject to either a treatment or intervention, and there was no manipulation of independent variables.

3.2. Setting

This research project was conducted entirely online. The study participants were contacted online through *Facebook* groups. The Iraqi refugee participants were residing in Europe, the United States, and/or Australia (Western nations) at the time of the study.

3.3. Participants

A small, voluntary, convenience sample of Iraqi refugee participants was utilized to gather data in Arabic, their native language. An even ratio of males to females was sought. The criteria for inclusion in this study as an Iraqi refugee participant was that the individual must have fled from Iraq and then requested refugee status or asylum in a Western

nation. The participant must have been at least 18 years of age at the time of the study, not have fled his/her home country before the age of seven, and he/she needed the ability to read and write in Arabic. Participants in this study did not receive any form of reward or compensation for their voluntary, risk-free participation.

3.4. Instruments

The first component of this correlational study utilized a professional, Arabic translation of the *Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH) Scale* (Fischer & Turner, 1970), as abridged and adapted (correlation of 0.87 between the original scale and the short version) into a ten-item form following a 4-point, Likert-type scale (3 = Agree, 0 = Disagree) in which items 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10 are reverse scored (Allyn et al., 1995). When adding up the numbers, higher scores indicated a more positive attitude towards seeking psychotherapy (Allyn et al., 1995). This scale had been previously used with both Eastern and Western populations, and the reliability and validity of the short-form measure had already been assessed and established as adequately consistent (Elhai et al., 2008).

In connection to the second component of this study, an Arabic translation of a ten-item, symptom-specific scale was utilized to measure participants' willingness to seek psychotherapy, employing a 5-point, Likert-type scale (5 = Very Likely, 1 = Very Unlikely) in response to specific mental health symptoms or issues. Higher scores indicated that a participant was more willing to seek psychotherapy for the aforementioned condition(s).

Before the two surveys were administered, participants read a statement of informed consent and a notice of confidentiality in Arabic, and then filled out a demographics' questionnaire in Arabic.

3.5. Procedures

The Arabic version of the surveys (professionally translated and back translated for accuracy) were administered through *Facebook* using the survey distribution software *SoSci Survey*. All data was collected and stored anonymously on a private, password-encrypted server. No specific identifying information of participants (i.e., names, addresses, phone numbers) was connected to the stored data, ensuring absolute confidentiality of materials. Each of the surveys was then scored and the data was synthesized into an Excel spreadsheet. The data was properly categorized along the independent and dependent variables and statistically analyzed with *Pearson's r* correlations to determine any support for our hypotheses. Findings are reported as correlation coefficients.

Limitations

The following limitations apply to this research:

- The correlational/non-experimental design of this study prevents the determination of any causation (i.e., we cannot conclude that the level of educational attainment *caused* the specific positive or negative attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy).
- Selection Bias: This online study relied on a small, non-randomized, voluntary, convenience sample of Iraqi refugees contacted through *Facebook*, which further prevents generalization.
- The research is also limited to the intersectional identity *Iraqi refugee*. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to migrants, refugees, Arabs, etc...

4. Results

Out of a total of 102 survey responses received, only 34 were complete and usable for this study. The final male to female ratio of the analyzed responses was 16:18. 16 of the participants resided in the European Union, while 11 resided in the United States, 4 resided in Australia, and 1 in the United Kingdom. The average age of the research participants was 47.5 years and the median level of educational attainment was a bachelor's degree, which is substantially higher than that of the average person around the world or in any of these regions. The average score on the *Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale* was 17, and the average score on the willingness to seek treatment scale was 28.6. Among the surveyed participants, no statistically significant difference could be established in either attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy or willingness to seek treatment based on gender or location. Also, age could not be correlated with either attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy or willingness to seek treatment among the sampled Iraqis. There was an almost negligible positive association between age and level of educational attainment ($r = 0.1$). Likewise, there was an extremely small, but positive correlation between level of educational attainment and willingness to seek treatment ($r = 0.1$). However, there was a clear, positive association between level of educational attainment and attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy ($r = 0.36$). Overall, there was also a clear, positive association between attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy and willingness to seek treatment ($r = 0.37$).

5. Discussion

As expected, and in alignment with previous research on Western populations, level of educational attainment among the Iraqi refugee participants positively correlated with attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy (and less robustly with willingness to seek treatment), but regardless of age for both variables. Ultimately, more positive attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy were also associated with a higher level of willingness to seek treatment, which further provides support for the research hypotheses and is in line with previous research findings, which have now been extended to this sample of Iraqi refugees. To obtain more concrete findings or correlations among other variables, future research will need to recruit a much larger number of participants.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, level of educational attainment among the Iraqi refugee participants positively correlated with attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy and willingness to seek treatment, regardless of age. More positive attitudes towards seeking psychotherapy were also associated with a higher level of willingness to seek treatment. These findings extend previous research to the intersectional identity of *Iraqi refugee*. To obtain more concrete findings or correlations among other variables, future research will need to recruit a much larger number of participants.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

A much broader version of this study had been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Mannheim in Baden-Württemberg, Germany in the spring of 2020. The author reports no conflict of interest in the publication of this research.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

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Appendix: The Surveys

Information On the Study & Notice of Confidentiality

The purpose of this study is to understand your views and attitudes regarding psychotherapy across multiple variables. In order to participate in this survey, you must be at least 18 years of age, identify as an Arab refugee, and cannot have left your country of origin before the age of 7. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and anonymous. There are no risks associated with your participation, and your answers will remain confidential. You will not be asked

for any identifying information such as names, addresses, emails, etc. You may halt your participation in this survey at any time. This survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. You will not receive any compensation for your participation or time spent filling out this survey, but your participation will be helpful to clinical psychology research. The data will only be reported anonymously for scientific purposes, and no identifying information will be connected to the data. All data will be stored in electronic form on a private, password-encrypted server. By filling out this form, you are consenting to both the survey and the anonymous usage of your data in doctoral research. If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Joseph Mandwee at jmandwee@mail.uni-mannheim.de. You can also reach him at the University of Mannheim, Department of Clinical & Biological Psychology and Psychotherapy, School of Social Sciences.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee (IRB) of the University of Mannheim. At any time, you are welcome to contact the responsible data protection officer of the University of Mannheim at the following e-mail address: datenschutzbeauftragte@uni-mannheim.de. The data protection contact persons at our department can also be reached at the following e-mail addresses: gerdes@uni-mannheim.de and schad@uni-mannheim.de. The data protection declaration of the University of Mannheim can be found at: <https://www.uni-mannheim.de/datenschutzerklaerung/>.

In addition, you have a right of complaint with the supervisory authorities. A list of supervisory authorities in Germany can be found at:

https://www.bfdi.bund.de/DE/Infothek/Anschriften_Links/anschriften_links-node.html

Demographics

Sex: Male__ Female__

Age: _____

Completed Education:

None__ Elementary School__ Middle School__ High School__

Bachelor's Degree__ Master's Degree__ Doctorate Degree__

Country of Origin: _____

Current Country of Residence: _____

ATSPPH SCALE

Instructions

Kindly read each statement carefully and indicate your degree of agreement using the scale below. In responding, please be completely candid.

0 = Disagree 1 = Partly Disagree 2 = Partly Agree 3 = Agree

___ 1. If I believed I was having a mental breakdown, my first inclination would be to get professional attention.

___ 2. The idea of talking about problems with a psychotherapist strikes me as a poor way to get rid of emotional conflicts.

___ 3. If I were experiencing a serious emotional crisis at this point in my life, I would be confident that I could find relief in psychotherapy.

___ 4. There is some admiration to the attitude of a person who is willing to cope with his or her conflicts and fears without resorting to professional help.

___ 5. I would want to get psychological help if I were worried or upset for a long period of time.

___ 6. I might want to have psychotherapy in the future.

___ 7. A person with an emotional problem is not likely to solve it alone; he or she is likely to solve it with professional help.

___ 8. Considering the time and expense involved in psychotherapy, it would have doubtful value for a person like me.

___ 9. A person should work out his or her own problems; getting psychotherapy would be a last resort.

___ 10. Personal and emotional troubles tend to work out by themselves.

SSTW SCALE

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Instructions

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “very unlikely” and 5 being “very likely”, how likely would you seek psychotherapy for each of the following reasons?:

- Marital Problems___
- Sexual Problems___
- Sleep Problems___
- Eating Problems___
- Stress___
- Fear___
- Sadness___
- Anxiety___
- Suicidal Thoughts___
- Hearing Voices___

You have completed the survey. Thank you very much for your participation!