

## Using the Theory of Planned Behavior to Predict Teachers' Intention to Refer

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined what would predict teachers' intention in referring distressed students to speak with mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists) with the theoretical framework of theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB (Ajzen, 1991) predicts people's intentions with attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control. Accordingly, this study considered teachers' attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control as their referral intention. This study also considers teachers' attitude toward help-seeking and communication skills as precedents of teachers' referral attitude and perceived behavioral control, respectively. A total of 368 teachers participated in the survey, and the SEM analysis confirms that teachers' attitude, subjective norm, and behavioral control predict teachers' referral intention. In addition, the model confirms that teachers' attitude toward help seeking predicts their referral attitude and teachers' communication skills predict their behavioral control.

Keywords: Theory of planned behavior; Teachers' Intention to refer.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH; 2017), 20% of children and adolescents have had or have a serious mental disorder. The percentage of children and adolescents with mental health issues would be much bigger if it includes students with symptoms not severe enough to be diagnosed as having a mental disorder. Despite the high prevalence of mental health problems among youth, only 20% of youth with mental health problems receive mental health services (Merikangas *et al.*, 2010). To bridge the gap between students in distress and students who receive needed professional mental health services, teachers' role as a gatekeeper is important.

Mental health issues significantly affect the overall function of children and adolescents, such as academic achievement (McLeod, Uemura, & Rohrman, 2012), lack of school connectedness (Loukas, Cance, & Batanova, 2016), school drop-out (Esch *et al.*, 2014), substance abuse (Conway *et al.*, 2016), and suicidal ideation (Nock *et al.*, 2013). Untreated mood or anxiety disorders in early life is associated with an increased risk of severe emotional distress, substance use, poor functioning, and suicide (Papandrea & Winefield, 2011; Cunningham & Suldo, 2014).

The school setting serves as an ideal context for the detection, prevention, and intervention of mental health problems (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003) because students spend long hours in school. Although consensus has been reached that the importance of school in addressing students' mental health issues (the National Education Association; NEA, 2017), there is no specific guidelines about how schools or teachers play a role in promoting students' mental health (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015).

Adding to the lack of clear guidelines for teachers in dealing with students' mental health issues, teachers encounter difficulty in identifying students with anxiety or depression (Cunningham & Suldo, 2014). The study examined teachers' (n = 153) ability to identify students mental health concerns indicated that although teachers were able to identify students with severe mental health issues, they were less accurate in identifying students with moderate or subclinical mental health issues (Splett *et al.*, 2018). In addition, teachers considered students who showed externalizing problems as having more serious issues than students with internalizing problems (Splett *et al.*, 2018). Qualitative study regarding teachers' reasons for referral indicated that teachers' referral reasons are based on their difficulty in controlling the students (Hinchliffe & Campbell, 2015). Therefore, compared to children and adolescents with externalizing disorders, such as ADHD, children with less obvious mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety are less likely to obtain referrals from teachers. Accordingly, although teachers' intention of referring students with ADHD (Lee, 2014) has been studied, no empirical study has examined the predictors of teachers' referral behavior in relation to general mental health.

### **1.1. Theory of Planned Behavior**

This study explored teachers' intention to refer distressed students with the theoretical framework of the theory of planned behavior. Theory of planned behavior (TPB) is a theoretical model that explains social and cognitive indicators of the enactment of behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). Ajzen's conceptual model demonstrates that people's attitude, subjective norm, and behavioral control to direct their intention to complete the behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and behavioral intention is a proximal indicator of enacting behavior.

In this study, attitude was defined as teachers' intention to refer distressed students to speak with mental health professionals. Subjective norm is defined as how teachers perceive important others' opinion about their referral behavior, and perceived behavior control is teachers' perception about how much control they have about their referral behavior. Accordingly, when teachers have a favorable attitude toward referral, teachers believe that others would approve of the referral behavior, whereas when the referral behavior is under their control, teachers would have intentions to act on referral behavior. Empirical research has validated TPB for predicting behaviors, such as losing weight (Schifter & Ajzen, 1985), engaging in safe sex (Cha, Kim, & Patrick, 2008), help-seeking behavior (Hess & Tracey, 2013), and referral behavior (Servaty-Seib *et al.*, 2013; Lee, 2014). However, no empirical study has examined teachers' referral intention regarding general mental health issues with the TPB framework.

### **1.2. Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Help**

Attitude is defined as the degree of favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a certain behavior. Previous studies of predictors of help-seeking intentions found that attitude is the strongest predictor (Schomerus, Matschinger, & Angermeyer, 2009). To understand teachers' referral attitude, examining their own attitude toward help seeking is important. The role of stigma on help seeking is well studied (Lannin *et al.*, 2016). Individuals with a

high level of mental health stigma would less likely seek mental health professionals when they are distressed. Although there is a study examined how parents' help-seeking stigma would influence whether they would seek mental health professional for their children or not (Ohan, Seward, Stallman, Bayliss, & Sanders, 2015), how teachers' attitude toward help seeking in influencing teachers' referral behavior has not been studied. If teachers do not see the value of seeking professional help in addressing mental health issues, they would not grasp the value of referring a student to speak with mental health professionals.

### **1.3. Communication Skills**

Behavioral control is a critical factor that determines referral intention because teachers with a perceived efficacy in dealing with student mental health are likely to act on it (Ajzen, 1986). Teachers' perceived ease or difficulty of referral behavior would be influenced by their communication skills. A qualitative study that examined teachers' perceived self-efficacy in confronting students' mental health issues showed that teachers are afraid of saying the "wrong" thing (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). The reluctance of residents assistants' to refer distressed students in residence hall was also associated with their ability to communicate with their residence (Taub *et al.*, 2013). These results indicated that teachers may lack the needed communication skills to make a referral, which would influence their confidence to engage with mental health issues (Finney, 2006; Kidger *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, teachers' communication skills would affect their perception of whether or not they have a choice in referring students.

### **1.4. Summary and Research Question**

This study aims to use TPB as a theoretical foundation to identify predictors of teachers' intentions to refer distressed students to speak with mental health professionals. This study also took interest in examining teachers' attitude toward referral behavior would be associated with their attitude toward help seeking as teachers own help-seeking attitude would influence their perceived value of referral. In addition, we hypothesized that behavioral control of referral behavior would be influenced by teachers' communication ability as teachers would feel less confident about communicating their intention to refer if they are less skilled in communicating with students. This study extended the TPB framework by considering predictors of TPB variables by taking account the unique context of teachers' referral, considering help-seeking attitude and communication skills as precedents of referral attitude and behavioral control, respectively.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants were 368 teachers who completed either an online or offline questionnaire. We distributed the online survey via teachers' online community while the offline version of the questionnaire was distributed to metropolitan areas in person. Teachers received \$5 Starbucks gift certification as compensation. Among the 368 teachers, 80% of the participants were female, and the ages ranged from 22–60 years ( $M = 39.61$ ,  $SD = 7.01$ ). In terms of students they are teaching, 145 teachers answered that they are in elementary school (38.7%), 117 teachers in middle school (31.2%), and 110 teachers in high school (29.3%). In terms of school location, 27 teachers answered that they work in a school located in a rural area (7.0%), 63 teachers answered that they work

in a school located in a suburb (16.4%), and 294 teachers indicated that they are in an urban area (76.4%). The mean number of referring students to speak with mental health professionals in their career was 4.41 (SD = 10.96, range = 0–100). Regarding the question of how long they had been teaching ranged from 1–42 years (M = 13.84, SD = 7.37).

## 2.2. Measurements

**2.2.1. TPB Questionnaire.** Teachers referral scale (Lee, 2020) was used to measure the TPB construct. The participants rated all TPB quantitative items by using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). As recommended by Francis *et al.* (2004), the mean scores of each of the four subscales were used in the analyses. The attitude scale consists of 6 items using bipolar adjectives, and an example item is referring a mental health professional when looking at an emotionally stressed student can measure teachers' attitudes toward referral behaviors as "harmful (1)" and "beneficial (7)". subjective norm consists of 4 items, and an example is "" Principle would encourage me to refer a distressed student to speak with a mental health professional (e.g., counselor, psychiatrist)". Perceived behavioral control consists of 2 items, and an example items is " The choice to refer a student to speak with a mental health professional (e.g., counselor, psychiatrist) is entirely up to me. Intention consists of 3 items, and an example question is "I intend to refer a distressed student to speak with a mental health professional (e.g., counselor, psychiatrist) ".

A higher score of attitudes indicated more positive attitude regarding the referral behavior, while a higher score of subjective norms indicated more positive perspective of others view on referral behavior. In addition, a higher score of control means a better sense of control in referral behavior. Lastly, a higher score of intention reflects greater willingness to refer a student. The construct validity of the TPB measure was tested using confirmatory factor analysis (Lee, 2020). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the attitudes, subjective norms, control, and intention were .757, .766, .683, and .621, respectively.

**2.2.2. Attitude toward help-seeking.** Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Help Scale-Short Form (ASPPH-SF; Fischer & Farina, 1995) was used to measure attitude toward help-seeking. The ASSPPH-SF measured the attitudes toward seeking professional help, comprises 10 items. Items were rated on 4-point Likert scale ranged from 0 (disagree) to 3 (agree). Five of the 10 items were reverse scored. Higher ASPPH-SF scores indicated more positive attitudes toward help seeking. The reliability of the ASPPH-SF was .84, and the one-month test-retest reliability was .80 in a U.S. sample (Fischer & Farina, 1995). The ASPPH-SF scale was translated and validated in Korean (Nam, 2010), and the reliability of the Korean version of the ASPPH-SF was .71 (Nam, 2010). The reliability coefficient in this study is .77.

**2.2.3. Communication skills.** Teachers' communication skills were measured by the Communication Skill Measure (Fritz *et al.*, 1999), which was translated into Korean (Choi & Choi, 2010). This measurement comprises five sub-scales, namely, concentration of communication, understanding and interpretation, analysis and evaluation, reaction, and memory. It consisted of 25 questions, five questions in each subscale. The scoring used a 5-point Likert scale, and the higher the score is, the higher the communication skills are. A reliability coefficient of .88 was reported (Kim & Cho,

2019). The reliability coefficient in this study was .91.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The correlations among variable study variables and the means and standard deviations of variables were shown in Table 1. The subscales of teachers' referral scale, attitudes, subjective norm, control, and intention were all positively correlated. Help-seeking attitude was positively correlated with referral intention and attitude, while communication skills was significantly correlated with all variables in this study.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among variables (N = 385)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. intention	-					
2. attitude	.37***	-				
3.subjective norm	.34***	.48***	-			
4. control	.25***	.32***	.35***	-		
5. help-seeking	.18**	.15**	-.055	-.01	-	
6. communication	.18**	.27**	.10*	.22**	.13**	-
<i>M</i>	5.30	5.22	4.31	3.88	3.20	3.97
<i>SD</i>	1.05	.73	1.13	.97	.43	.45

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .05$ .

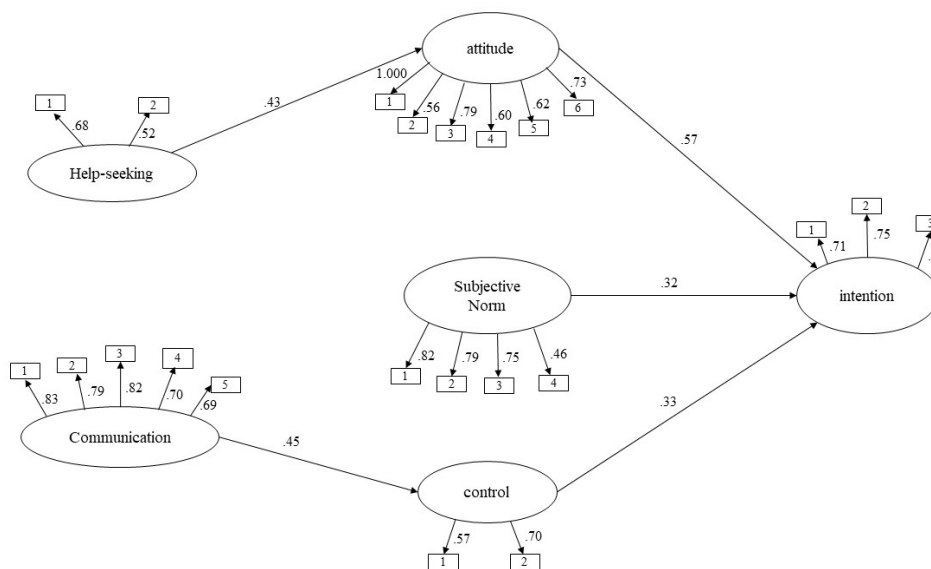
#### 3.2. Testing Mediation Model

By using the theoretical framework of TPB, we investigated whether teachers' attitude toward help seeking would be associated with attitude toward referral behavior. We also examined if teachers' communication skills would be associated with their behavioral control. With the two precedents added, we tested to see if teachers' attitude, subjective norm, and behavioral control would predict their referral intention. First, we tested the measurement model and assessed the model data fit, resultantly, the hypothesized model has good fit to the data,  $\chi^2 (188) = 373.682$  ( $p < .001$ ), CFI = .939, TLI = .926, IFI = 0.940, RMSEA = .051 (.043-.058). The factor loading for attitude ranged from .415-.829, for subjective norm ranged from .46-.82, for control ranged from .57-.70, and for intention ranged from .71-.77. The factor loading for attitude toward help seeking ranged from .52-.68, and for communication skills ranged from .70-.83.

After confirming the measurement model, we tested the structural model. The hypothesized model has good fit to the data,  $\chi^2 (198) = 436.728$  ( $p < .001$ ), CFI = .922, TLI = .909, IFI = .923, and RMSEA = .056 (.049-.063). Figure 1 shows all paths are significant to intention via attitudes, subjective norms, and control. Specifically, the positive effects of attitudes, subjective norms, and control on intention were significant and consistent with the predictions of TPB theoretical framework. The path from attitude

toward help seeking to attitudes toward referral behavior was significant. Teachers with negative perception of help seeking are likely to refer their students to speak with mental health professionals. Moreover, teachers with better communication skills have more perceived behavioral control in referring students.

Figure 1



#### 4. DISCUSSION

Using the conceptual framework of TPB (Ajzen, 1991), this study examined teachers’ intention to refer distressed students to speak with mental health professionals. As suggested by TPB, we hypothesized that teachers’ attitude, subjective norms, and behavioral control of referral behavior would be associated with their intention to refer. Moreover, we hypothesized that teachers own attitude toward help seeking would influence their attitudes toward referral while teachers’ communication skills would prompt their referral efficacy.

The results of this study confirmed the effectiveness of TPB in predicting teachers’ referral intention. More specifically, a more positive attitude, more perceived approval from others about referral behavior, and more sense of behavioral control teachers have, the more intention teachers have to refer distressed students. When teachers perceive the value of referral behavior and consider it beneficial, responsible, and valuable (i.e., attitude), they are likely to refer distressed students. The result suggests that teachers must perceive the value of referral behavior for them to be motivated to do so. Also, when teachers perceived approval from parents, principles, and students about their referral behavior, they showed more intention to refer. Thus, collaborations among school administration, parents, and teachers are needed in helping distressed students. Teachers are not the only ones who can help students, and other students’ perception about referral behavior is also important, as well as principles and parents of students. The result of the study showed the importance of teachers’ referral efficacy, therefore, teachers must be supported for them to have the needed skill set to make a referral.

The findings extended the TPB by examining the effects of teachers' attitude toward help seeking and communication skills on referral intentions among teachers, in addition to well-known TPB variables. In understanding the role of teachers' attitude in predicting their intention to refer, identifying what would predict teachers' referral attitude is also necessary. The result of the study confirmed that teachers must be aware of the value of professional mental health services for them to be motivated to refer distressed students to speak with mental health professionals. If teachers themselves do not see the value of talking to a counselor, they are less likely to refer their students. Therefore, addressing teachers' own stigma toward help seeking in teacher education is essential. Especially in a culture where a strong stigma is present toward help seeking, it would be important to promote social awareness of the value of help seeking.

The results of the study showed the importance of teachers' communication skills in perceiving their behavioral control in making a referral. Conveying empathy for students in referral process is critical, and also the relationship quality between teacher and student would influence whether the student would follow through with the teacher's referral or not. Therefore, to intervene in behavioral control toward referral behavior, improving teachers' communication skills is important. Most of teachers' education programs are targeted toward helping distressed students provide knowledge of warning signs of mental health crisis or symptoms of depression (Kuhlman, Walch, Bauer, & Glenn, 2017), but it would be more effective to teach them the needed communication skills in conveying their intention to refer distressed students.

#### **4. 1. Implications**

This research will contribute to understanding the factors that influence teachers' referral intentions, and the results of the study can be used for developing and delivering psycho-educational programs to increase favorable attitudes, decrease stigma, and increase behavioral control regarding referral intention as well as less stigma toward help seeking and more communication skills. Most of the gatekeeper training is focused on increasing knowledge of risk factors and warning signs of suicide and depression (Kuhlman, Walch, Bauer, & Glenn, 2017). However, the result of the present study showed that teachers' referral attitude is associated with their help-seeking stigma, which their referral efficacy is associated with their communication skills. The result of the current study can be used in developing outreach or education programs for teachers to increase their referral efficacy by proving communication skills training and interactive intervention to reduce help-seeking stigma. In addition, the result of this study can provide foundation for future study examining factors that influence teachers' referral behavior.

#### **4.2. Limitations**

Certain limitations exist in this study that must be addressed. First, the nature of our sample has limits on generalizing our findings. We collected the data from a sample of South Korean teachers with various backgrounds using online and offline surveys, but these teachers may not be applicable teachers with different cultural backgrounds. Second, we did not include actual referral behavior in the model, therefore, further investigations testing the model to confirm if these intention predictors would lead to actual referral behavior would be needed.

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