Attitudes and intentions towards mental health assistance by New Zealand’s baby boomers

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Little information exists regarding baby boomers’ attitudes and intentions towards mental health help-seeking. This is surprising considering this generation, known for its size and living through the most influential period of social change in history, is associated with increased rates of certain mental health disorders. As this cohort age over 65, information about intentions or attitudes towards help-seeking for increasingly common disorders in older age (depression, anxiety, the dementias and substance abuse) is crucial. This research examined this subject by: investigating any intention or attitude differences relating to age; examining intention towards professional and preventive help for the four mental health concerns outlined above; and determining the association between and contribution of relevant variables towards the baby boomers’ stated help-seeking intentions within the framework of a social cognitive model of help-seeking: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

Participants were a convenience sample of 256 New Zealand baby boomers (aged 49-69), who completed an anonymous, self-report questionnaire measuring demographic variables, intention towards professional and preventive help for four disorders, attitudes towards help-seeking, emotional distress and a previous professional help rating.

Attitudes towards seeking psychological help and intentions towards seeking professional and preventive help showed no significant differences with relation to age. The cohort were generally positive about seeking both preventive and professional help, and attitude towards seeking help for mental health problems was also positive.

Intention towards professional help was higher for depression and substance abuse than for anxiety and forgetfulness (the dementias). For preventive help, intentions were uniformly high across all four disorders.
Within the TPB model, support was achieved for the TPB variables Psychological Openness (PO) and to an extent Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) as significant predictors of professional help-seeking behaviour and their contribution in explaining help-seeking behaviour in this cohort. PO and PBC associated significantly with professional and preventive intent across most disorders investigated. The implications of these findings and directions for future research are discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Producing this thesis has been a richly rewarding experience, from its inception right through to completion. At the heart of why this was are the many people I have had the pleasure of working with and being supported by. Thanks, therefore, go to a number of key people.

First, my family and in particular my husband and Mother who have unfailingly been there for me and with me this year with time and emotional support. Also to my daughter Vida Pip, whilst you have no idea what I’ve been up to, your ready smiles are wonderful fuel for a writer and student.

To my supervisor Associate Professor Paul Merrick: thank you for your constructive and consistently available advice and feedback. I have greatly enjoyed working with you and will take a number of key learnings away with me for future endeavours.

Thank you to the Selwyn HOPE Foundation into research for the ageing for the generous financial assistance I received which has allowed me to complete this thesis. In particular, to my key contact Rex Paddy: thank you for your kind words and encouragement via email as the year has progressed.

To my dear friends Hannah and Dan Sperber: I greatly appreciated the time you spent discussing this project with me. To the wider community of family and friends I am lucky to have, thank you for many different kinds of help.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Gerben Westerhof at the University of Twente for supplying me with the original study this thesis is based on in such a timely way.

Thank you to Radio Live for offering me an interview during Mens’ Health Week in order to publicise this research and thank you to the numerous organisations and schools throughout New Zealand, and there are too many to list, who took questionnaires or emailed their members or employees about this project.
And lastly thanks goes to the many anonymous participants who completed the research questionnaire. I thank you for your time and tacit encouragement in filling out and returning it to me as without your involvement this study would have not materialised. I hope the findings offer all who read it food for thought.
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GLOSSARY

ATSPPHS-SF: Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form

CBT: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

DHB: District Health Board

DSM-IV: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 4th Edition

DSM-V: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5th Edition

HBM: Health Belief Model

HCL-21: Hopkins Checklist 21

IS: Indifference to Stigma

Leading-edge: Baby boomers born between 1946 and 1955

PO: Psychological Openness

PBC: Perceived Behavioural Control

PHO: Primary Health Organisation

RCT: Randomised Controlled Trial

SUD: Substance Use Disorder

Tail-enders: Baby boomers born between 1956 and 1965

TRA: Theory of Reasoned Action

TFR: Total Fertility Rate - the measure demographers use to define a baby boom and the average number of children born to a woman over her lifetime

TPB: Theory of Planned Behaviour

VaD: Vascular Dementia
CHAPTER ONE

Rationale and Research Aims

Vast numbers of ‘baby boomers’ (the name of the generation born between 1946 and 1965) are reaching 65 years of age and over. For example, in 2009 the numbers of those classed as officially ‘elderly’ in New Zealand was 550,000, and this is expected to increase to one million by the late 2020s (Statistics NZ, 2009). Despite their size and the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders including depression (Wells, 2006a), anxiety (Byers, Yaffe, Covinsky, Friedman, & Bruce, 2010), the dementias (Alzheimer's New Zealand, 2012), and substance abuse (M. Johnston, 2013) associated with this age group, baby boomers are a population about which little is known of their attitudes and intentions towards mental health help-seeking. This knowledge shortfall exists despite the future strain on the mental health system that this cohort denotes. An aim of the current study is to address this research gap and understand help-seeking intention and attitude by this cohort towards the most common disorders now faced in later life. Additionally, when considering the baby boomers’ size and the fact that even when performing optimally only 60 percent of the burden of mental health illness is averted through a mental health system (Andrews, Issakidis, Sanderson, Corry, & Lapsley, 2004) the current research sought to broaden help-seeking options to include both professional and preventive options. An aim of this study is to investigate what level of inclination baby boomers will demonstrate towards prevention as preventive approaches have the potential to not only maximise health outcomes but minimise health care costs among older adults, complementing the current system and potentially reducing the anticipated strain.

Due to the twenty year time-frame baby boomers come from and the vastly different life events they have experienced, another aim of the current research was to identify whether