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

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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.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	1
Rationale and Research Aims	1
CHAPTER TWO: THE BABY BOOMERS	4
The Baby Boom	4
New Zealand’s Baby Boomers.....	7
Events That Shaped A Generation	13
CHAPTER THREE: BABY BOOMER’S MENTAL HEALTH AND THE SERVICES AVAILABLE.....	21
New Zealand Baby Boomers And Their Mental Health	21
Future Mental Health for Baby Boomers in Older Age	24
Mental Health Services Available In New Zealand	35
Preventive Strategies For Mental Health	41
CHAPTER FOUR: HELP-SEEKING AND THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR	53
Help-seeking.....	54
Help-seeking Models.....	58
Theory Of Planned Behaviour (TPB).....	60
The Current Study	79
CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY	84
Procedure For Obtaining Participants And Data Collection	84
Ethical Considerations.....	89

Measures And Their Connection To The TPB Model/Help-Seeking	90
Design Strategy	96
Data Screening	98
CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS - UNIVARIATE	100
Univariate Descriptive Statistics, Correlation And Parametric <i>t</i> -tests For Continuous Variables For The Whole Sample	100
Differences Between Males And Females	105
Differences Between Those Who Had Received Professional Help Or Not	106
Univariate Statistics For Non-Continuous Variables	109
Qualitative Information For Open-Ended Text.....	112
CHAPTER SEVEN: RESULTS - DETERMINANTS OF INTENTIONS TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR: DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, FORGETFULNESS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE	116
Bivariate Relationships	116
Multiple Regression Analysis	119
CHAPTER EIGHT: RESULTS - LEADING-EDGE VERSUS TAIL-ENDERS	123
Comparing Non-Continuous Data Between The Tail-Enders And Leading-Edge	124
CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION	127
Current Findings' Summary..	127
Current Research In Comparison To Existing Research.....	129
Study Limitations	154
Directions For Further Research	160

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION.....	164
APPENDICES	167
Appendix A: Online Version Of Participant Questionnaire	168
Appendix B: Paper Version Of Participant Questionnaire.....	195
Appendix C: Raw Data Frequency Tables	209
Appendix D: Independent <i>t</i> -tests, hierarchical multiple regression and multivariate tests	213
References.....	216

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Figure 2. An edited Theory of Planned Behaviour and additional variables.

Figure 3. Previous psychological problems recorded by participants.

Figure 4. Preventive options selected by participants.

Figure 5. Comparing tail-end and leading-edge responses for preventive options.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sample comparing leading-edge and tail-end baby boomers.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all continuous variables.

Table 3. Paired *t*-tests for intention towards professional help.

Table 4. Paired *t*-tests for intention towards professional help and preventive help.

Table 5. Preventive course considered between male and female.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of those who had sought professional help and those that had not, and independent *t*-tests between them.

Table 7. Simple correlations amongst determinants for intention to professional and preventive help for depression, anxiety, forgetfulness and substance abuse.

Table 8. Results from the hierarchical regression analysis of intentions towards professional help for depression on specific TPB variables and other variables.

Table 9. Results from the hierarchical regression analysis of intentions towards professional help for anxiety on specific TPB variables and other variables.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics of key measures comparing leading-edge and tail-end groups.

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