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Helpseeking among prison inmates: A test of the Theory of Planned Behaviour

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Abstract

Prison inmates are more likely than those in the general population to experience psychiatric disorders and related problems such as suicidal thinking, but are less likely to have contact with mental health services. The current study examined factors that could facilitate professional helpseeking in New Zealand prison inmates. Two versions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) formed the theoretical basis for the study. The first was the standard TPB with attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control as determinants of helpseeking intentions, and behaviour. An extended version of the TPB included these variables and also the effects of inmates' prior contact with a psychologist, and their current emotional distress on helpseeking intentions and behaviour. A TPB helpseeking questionnaire was developed and trialled with a sample ($n = 52$) of male New Zealand prison inmates from one prison. Inmates at six other prisons ($n = 515$) then completed the final questionnaire, which assessed attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and intentions to seek help from a prison psychologist. Participants' helpseeking was monitored over the following year through Corrections Psychological Service databases. Of the 419 inmates who were followed up, 88 were referred to a prison psychologist, which provided a proxy measure of helpseeking behaviour.

The standard TPB explained up to 44% of the variance in prison inmate intentions to seek help for a "personal-emotional problem", and up to 33% of the variance for intentions to seek help for "suicidal feelings". Helpseeking attitudes and subjective norms were consistent and strong determinants of helpseeking intentions, whereas perceptions of behavioural control with respect to seeing a psychologist had a weak relationship with helpseeking intentions. There was some support for the extended version of the TPB model. The explained variance in helpseeking intentions increased slightly with the addition of prior contact and emotional distress to the model. Prior contact and emotional distress were associated with

higher intentions to seek help, although the strength of these relationships varied according to which version of the TPB was tested. The standard and extended versions of the TPB had low predictive capacity for actual helpseeking as reflected in referral to a prison psychologist. General attitude (in one regression equation), age and prior contact with a psychologist were the only independent predictors of helpseeking behaviour. Inmates who sought help tended to have more favourable helpseeking attitudes. Prior contact with a psychologist was an approach factor for seeking help for a personal-emotional problem and for helpseeking for suicidal feelings. Age was the strongest predictor of helpseeking behaviour, in that older inmates were more likely than others to actually seek referral to a prison psychologist. The most striking finding for the current study was that contrary to the TPB model, intentions to seek help did not predict helpseeking behaviour for either emotional or suicidal problems.

Recommendations are made regarding future TPB-based helpseeking research. Interview responses from the pilot study indicated that male-role characteristics, therapist gender and psychologists' cultural knowledge may influence inmates' willingness to seek psychological help. It may be fruitful for future TPB-based helpseeking studies to incorporate these aspects of helpseeking. It is also suggested that future helpseeking studies within a TPB framework further develop the subjective norm construct to include possible stigma concerns that inmates experience. The current study used an indirect measure of helpseeking behaviour, and suggestions are made to improve the prediction of helpseeking behaviour from the TPB. Specifically, the behaviour measure could incorporate other sources of help approached by inmates when they experience significant personal problems, and could detail the type of problems that prompt actual helpseeking. Finally, recommendations are made regarding prison-based interventions to improve inmate helpseeking.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH CONTEXT AND THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR	3
NEW ZEALAND PRISONS	3
<i>Offence and mental health data</i>	3
<i>Prison suicide</i>	4
<i>The inmate experience</i>	5
<i>Psychological and psychiatric services for inmates</i>	7
THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR.....	10
<i>Attitude and behaviour research</i>	10
<i>Definition and prediction of behaviour</i>	12
<i>Intentions to act</i>	13
<i>The determinants of intentions</i>	17
<i>Attitudes</i>	17
<i>Subjective norms</i>	20
<i>Perceived behavioural control</i>	23
<i>Relationships among the TPB variables</i>	25
CURRENT EMPIRICAL STATUS OF THE TPB.....	28
<i>Brief overview of TPB research</i>	28
<i>Summary of empirical status of the TPB</i>	32
CHAPTER 2: THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR AND HELPSEEKING.....	34
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TPB VARIABLES AND HELPSEEKING CONSTRUCTS	34
<i>Helpseeking behaviour</i>	34
<i>Intentions to seek psychological help</i>	36
<i>Helpseeking attitudes</i>	39
<i>Subjective norms and helpseeking</i>	41
<i>Personal control and helpseeking</i>	42
TPB – THE ROLE OF PRIOR CONTACT AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS	45
<i>Prior behaviour</i>	45
<i>Psychological distress and helpseeking</i>	47
LOCATING THE TPB WITHIN HELPSEEKING	51
<i>Key helpseeking variables</i>	51
Socio-demographics - age, social class, ethnicity and gender.....	51
Personality variables	55
<i>The helpseeking process</i>	57
<i>Helpseeking models</i>	59
APPLICABILITY OF THE TPB TO INMATES' HELPSEEKING	63
<i>TPB and NZ prison inmate helpseeking</i>	63
<i>Prior studies of inmate helpseeking</i>	65
THE PRESENT STUDY	68
<i>General description and aims of the study</i>	68
<i>Research hypotheses</i>	71
The Theory of Planned Behaviour.....	71
Extended TPB, integrating prior contact and emotional distress.....	71
CHAPTER 3: METHOD	73
PROCEDURES FOR GAINING PARTICIPATION	74
<i>Pilot study</i>	74
<i>Cross-sectional study</i>	75
<i>Follow-up study</i>	76
SUBJECT CHARACTERISTICS.....	77

<i>Pilot study</i>	77
<i>Cross-sectional study</i>	78
<i>Follow-up study</i>	80
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES	80
<i>Pilot study</i>	80
<i>Cross-sectional study</i>	81
<i>Follow-up study</i>	81
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	82
MEASURES	84
<i>Helpseeking behaviour</i>	86
<i>Intentions to seek psychological help</i>	87
<i>Attitudes</i>	88
General attitude measure – ATSPPHS (short form).....	88
Specific attitude measure	91
<i>Perceived behavioural control</i>	93
General perceived control measure	94
Specific perceived control measure	94
<i>Subjective norms</i>	95
General subjective norms measure.....	95
Specific subjective norms measure	96
<i>Extended TPB measures</i>	97
Emotional distress	97
Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (Critical Items)	99
Prior help.....	100
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS - HELPSEEKING FOR A PERSONAL-EMOTIONAL PROBLEM.....	102
OUTLINE OF ANALYTIC STRATEGY	102
<i>Data screening</i>	104
<i>Univariate descriptive statistics for continuous variables</i>	106
<i>Univariate descriptive statistics for non-continuous variables</i>	109
DETERMINANTS OF INTENTIONS TO SEEK HELP, PERSONAL-EMOTIONAL PROBLEM	109
<i>Bivariate relationships</i>	109
<i>Multiple regression analyses</i>	112
DETERMINANTS OF HELPSEEKING BEHAVIOUR, PERSONAL-EMOTIONAL PROBLEM	116
<i>Bivariate relationships</i>	116
<i>Logistic regression analyses</i>	119
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS - HELPSEEKING FOR SUICIDAL FEELINGS	122
DETERMINANTS OF INTENTIONS TO SEEK HELP FOR SUICIDAL FEELINGS	122
<i>Bivariate relationships</i>	122
<i>Multiple regression analyses</i>	124
DETERMINANTS OF HELPSEEKING BEHAVIOUR FOR SUICIDAL FEELINGS	128
<i>Bivariate relationships</i>	129
<i>Logistic regression analyses</i>	130
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION	133
THEORETICAL ISSUES	134
<i>Performance of the TPB in the present study</i>	134
Determinants of helpseeking intentions	134
The prediction of helpseeking behaviour.....	137
<i>Comparison of TPB and helpseeking with other TPB applications</i>	138
Intention-behaviour relationship	139
Determinants of helpseeking intentions	140
Relative magnitude of the predictor variables	140
Contribution of PBC to intention and behaviour	141
Relationships between the specific and general TPB measures	142
<i>Helpseeking intentions and behaviour</i>	144

The intention-behaviour relationship is weak or non-existent for prison-based helpseeking	144
The measurement strategy failed to detect an intention-behaviour relationship	145
<i>Integration of findings with prior research on inmates' helpseeking</i>	148
Does inmates' helpseeking vary for different problems?	148
The extended TPB and helpseeking	149
<i>Other helpseeking variables in the research</i>	151
Inmates' ethnicity, education and age	152
Psychologists' gender and cultural knowledge	153
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES	154
<i>Current study issues</i>	154
General sampling issues	154
Impact of unique sample characteristics on study findings	156
<i>TPB and study methodological issues</i>	157
Questionnaire development, length and format	157
Scaling used for belief-based measures	158
Form of expectancy-value measure used	160
<i>Further TPB-based helpseeking research</i>	162
Readministration of helpseeking questionnaire items	162
Development of the subjective norm construct	163
Summary of methodological issues	164
POLICY AND PRACTICE ISSUES	164
<i>TPB-based interventions for helpseeking</i>	165
General attitude	166
Beliefs: help-seekers and non-help seekers	167
<i>Helpseeking-literature based interventions</i>	170
<i>Changes to prison and procedures</i>	172
<i>Summary of policy and procedure issues</i>	176
REFERENCES	177
APPENDIX A: PILOT STUDY INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS	205
APPENDIX B: PILOT STUDY HELPSEEKING INTERVIEW	208
APPENDIX C: PILOT STUDY TRIAL VERSION - HELPSEEKING QUESTIONNAIRE	221
APPENDIX D: CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS	236
APPENDIX E: CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY HELPSEEKING QUESTIONNAIRE	239
APPENDIX F: CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY PARTICIPANTS' RESULTS FEEDBACK	252
APPENDIX G: PILOT STUDY QUALITATIVE RESPONSES	254
APPENDIX H: SPECIFIC ATTITUDE MEASURE ITEMS	265
APPENDIX I: TPB MEASUREMENT ISSUES - MULTIPLICATIVE COMPOSITES, BIPOLAR VERSUS UNIPOLAR SCALING	269
APPENDIX J: BARRIERS TO HELPSEEKING AMONG PRISON INMATES (IN PRESS, JOURNAL OF OFFENDER REHABILITATION)	272

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR	12
FIGURE 2. THE EXTENDED TPB MODEL.....	50
FIGURE 3. THE TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES.....	54

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. AVERAGE MAGNITUDE OF RELATIONSHIPS FOR THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR VARIABLES..	30
TABLE 2. PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION & HISTORY OF CONTACT WITH A PSYCHOLOGIST..	78
TABLE 3. MAIN OFFENCE TYPE - CROSS-SECTIONAL AND FOLLOW-UP STUDY PARTICIPANTS.....	79
TABLE 4. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (BASED ON THE LARGEST POSSIBLE SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLES FROM HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES) FOR TPB VARIABLES, EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS	106
TABLE 5. SIMPLE CORRELATIONS AMONG DETERMINANTS OF INTENTIONS (SPECIFIC TPB BELOW DIAGONAL, N = 328, GENERAL TPB ABOVE DIAGONAL, N = 353)	110
TABLE 6. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES OF INTENTIONS ON SPECIFIC TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES, N = 328	113
TABLE 7. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES OF INTENTIONS ON GENERAL TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES, N = 353	114
TABLE 8. SIMPLE CORRELATIONS AMONG DETERMINANTS OF BEHAVIOUR (SPECIFIC TPB BELOW DIAGONAL, N = 275, GENERAL TPB ABOVE DIAGONAL, N = 292)	116
TABLE 9. COMPARISON OF REFERRED AND NON-REFERRED FOLLOW-UP STUDY PARTICIPANTS ON TPB VARIABLES, EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND AGE.....	117
TABLE 10. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEHAVIOUR ON SPECIFIC TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES (N = 275)	120
TABLE 11. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEHAVIOUR ON GENERAL TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES (N = 292)	121
TABLE 12. SIMPLE CORRELATIONS AMONG DETERMINANTS OF INTENTIONS (SPECIFIC TPB BELOW DIAGONAL, N = 357, GENERAL TPB ABOVE DIAGONAL, N = 384)	123
TABLE 13. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES OF INTENTIONS ON SPECIFIC TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES, N = 357	125
TABLE 14. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES OF INTENTIONS ON GENERAL TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES, N = 384	126
TABLE 15. SIMPLE CORRELATIONS AMONG DETERMINANTS OF HELPSEEKING BEHAVIOUR (SPECIFIC TPB BELOW DIAGONAL, N = 302, GENERAL TPB ABOVE DIAGONAL, N = 318)	129
TABLE 16. RESULTS FROM HIERARCHICAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEHAVIOUR ON SPECIFIC TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES (N = 302)	130
TABLE 17. RESULTS FROM LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEHAVIOUR ON GENERAL TPB AND OTHER VARIABLES (N = 318)	131
TABLE 18. COMPARISON OF CURRENT STUDY TPB RELATIONSHIPS WITH THOSE FROM THE ARMITAGE & CONNER (2001) META-ANALYSIS.....	139