

University Students' Perception on Peer Counselling Services in Kenya

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Abstract: Peer counselling refers to the help among and by people of the same age group or people operating at the same level who take charge of assisting each other on various issues that affect them. Based on this understanding many universities have established peer counselling as one of the ways of helping university students cope with their day to day issues. This study sought to establish the perception of the university students on peer counselling services; identify the factors influencing perception and the role of university management in influencing positive perception of their students on peer counselling. Questionnaires and focus group discussion guides were used to collect data. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in form of means, percentages and frequencies. Tests of independence were also used to determine significant relationships between the social demographic data and perception on Peer Counselling Services. The findings revealed that a large percentage of the university students, a representation of 87%, had negative perception on Peer Counselling Services contrary to the general expectation. Some of the major recommendations by the study were that University management should provide relevant training and support to their peer counsellors and offer close supervision by the trained counsellors. Peer counsellors are also recommended to undertake all peer counselling trainings offered by the university management and participate in the sensitization activities conducted by the university which would create awareness and develop a positive perception on peer counselling services which in turn will help minimize the challenges experienced by the university students.

Keywords: Peer counselling, perception, empathy, counselling, coping, development, university.

INTRODUCTION

Peer counselling has often been defined as the psychological help offered by people of the same age group, workmates or people operating at the same level who take charge of assisting each other on various issues that affect them [1]. This is probably because people of the same age share similar experiences, interest and concerns. The concept of peer counselling had its beginning in 1939 with the establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous [2]. It was found that people who had experienced the problem of alcoholism and overcame it through AA program would be more effective in assisting others who were trying to do the same. AbuRasain & William [3] stipulates that the concept of peer counselling is mainly underpinned by the commonalities of peer members because they have the capacity to influence each other through empathy. In addition, it is assumed that developmental and psychosocial issues experienced by the university students are similar globally, hence counselling by peers may be more effective than mainstream counselling.

Empathy, being a powerful principle which helps the client feel understood, makes it easy for peers to engage in peer counselling among the university

students. At the university, peer counselling is offered by peers formally or informally as they assist each other deal with their day to day issues. Formal peer counselling among the university students takes place under supervision through a programmed routine, while informal peer counselling takes place among peers as they interact during social activities over unplanned times. Despite several university administrators having invested much on peer counselling among the university students by initiating peer counselling programs in the universities, university students continue to manifest psychosocial challenges. It is therefore important to understand the perception of peer counselling amongst the university students.

Perception refers to the way sensory information is organized, interpreted, and consciously experienced. It refers to the psychological process involved in the immediate organization of sensations that underlie information intake. The process of perception involves both the information we take in through our senses and previous knowledge about the phenomenon at hand to understand our context. The implication is that perception can be affected by different factors within the environment.

In addition, perception refers to entirety of human reactions to a decision taken in specific context, and it implies cognitive reactions and behavioural reactions [4]. From the cognitive perspective, the psychological aspects that are shaped partly by the environment and personal aspects are equally important in shaping behaviour. Studies have shown that perception and behaviour can interact synergistically via the environment [5]. Accordingly, perception forms associations with an action, organized by reinforcement. According to Keller [6] psychological functions such as attitudes towards seeking counselling influences perception.

Attitude is described as the way one thinks and feels about something. According to Vakola & Nikolau [7] negative attitude towards change in an organization is influenced by the occupational stressors that an individual may be experiencing. This means that people will respond to any change according to their attitude whether positive or negative. Accordingly, university students with positive attitude towards PCS will result in positive perception of the service. In addition, Keller [6] noted that self-awareness and willingness to seek help are significant predictors for perception. Likewise, a study carried out by Cepeda-Benito [8], found a positive interaction between psychological distress, attitudes towards searching psychological counselling, present social support and self-awareness as well as available social support. This means that, any of these aspects may influence people's type of perception whether positive or negative. However, perception is also influenced by experience which could be moderated by demographic factors such as age, gender, and culture and level of education, program they are undertaking, and their year of study [9].

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- To establish the perception of university students on peer counselling.
- To identify the factors that influence perception of the university students on peer counselling.
- To establish the role of the university management in influencing positive perception of the university students on peer counselling.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive correlational survey design. The researcher collected and analysed data using quantitative as well as qualitative methods [10]. The design was suitable because it described the perception of the university students on peer counselling services and factors that influencing perception as well as the role played by university management in influencing positive perception amongst the university students.

The study targeted university students in both Nairobi and Nakuru Counties in Kenya. Stratified random sampling was used in selecting the four

institutions that were used for this study. A deliberate section of particular units of the universe for constituting a sample which represent the universe is supported by Kothari [11]. Simple random sampling was used to select 400 students. According to Kathuri & Pals [12] the required size for population of between 100,000 to 150,000 requires a sample of 384, using the formulae:

$$n = \frac{\chi^2 NP (1-P)}{\sigma^2 (N-1) + \chi^2 P (1-P)}$$

Where,

n= required sample size

N= the given population size of university students

P= population proportion assumed to be 0.50

σ^2 = degree of accuracy whose value is 0.05

χ^2 = table value of chi-square for one degree of freedom

Based on the accuracy of data, the margins of error associated with sampling and other random effects at 95% confidence level was kept at a maximum of +4% for a sample size of 384. Hence a sampled size of students of 400 was selected. Simple random sampling was appropriate as it ensured representativeness, since it gave the respondents an equal and independent opportunity of being selected.

Questionnaires, focus group discussion guides and individual interviews were the data collection instruments used. The study used both open ended and closed ended questionnaires to collect the data from the students in the selected universities. The questionnaire was the most appropriate research tool as it allowed the researcher to collect information from a large sample with diverse background; the findings remained confidential and saved time [10]. Mugenda [13] Kothari [11] agree that questionnaires have various merits: it is free from the bias of the interviewer; answers are in respondents own words, respondents have adequate time to give well thought out answers.

The questionnaire had three sections: A, B and C, in which Section A and B was on the bio-data and on their perception on peer counselling, while Section C, sought to establish the role of the university management in peer counselling.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION PERCEPTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TOWARDS PEER COUNSELLING

The term perception refers to psychological process involved in the immediate organization of sensations that underlie information intake. In the current study, perception was scored as either positive or negative. As much as it is expected that university students may perceive peer counselling positively because of the being in the same developmental stage, the study found out that there were majority of

university students who had negative perception towards peer counselling.

Figure-1 reveals that cumulatively, most students, 87% had negative perception towards peer

counselling services while only 13% had a positive perception, contrary to general assumption that many university students would be willing to seek for peer counselling services.

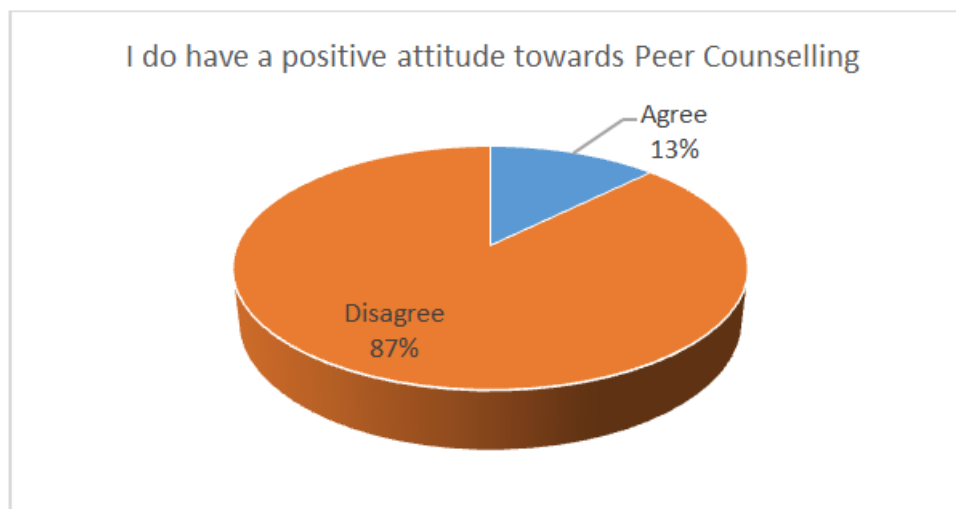


Fig-1: Overall perception by University Students on Peer Counselling

To establish the student’s attitude, willingness and experiential management of issues, which would influence their perception on seeking counselling services [6], the participants were presented with a 13-

Item questionnaire, measured on a 3-point Likert scale represented by: Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Not Sure (1). The findings were as follows:

Table-1: Questionnaire Items Response by University Students

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
1	When distressed I think of peer counselling services as the first help	48%	37%	16%
2	I am willing to work with peer counsellors to help me solve my problems	22%	59%	19%
3	I experience general unwillingness toward peer counselling services	49%	35%	16%
4	I feel embarrassed to attend Peer counselling sessions	62%	22%	16%
5	In my opinion peer counselling is not important	90%	9%	1%
6	I cannot manage my problems without attending peer counselling	31%	53%	17%
7	In my opinion peer counselling is for people with mental illnesses	88%	6%	6%
8	I have a negative attitude towards peer counselling	79%	13%	8%
9	I prefer to keep my problems to myself	56%	36%	9%
10	I think peer counselling is a waste of time	82%	10%	8%
11	I have a positive attitude towards Peer Counselling	11%	75%	15%
12	I would be willing to seek Peer Counselling v Services when faced with issues	17%	66%	17%
13	I would not care much about what other students think me when I attend Peer Counselling Services	13%	75%	12%

Attitude influencing perception

As depicted in Table-2, the study realized that a majority of the students, 79% had a negative attitude towards peer counselling an almost similar percentage, 75% to those who disagreed to having a positive

attitude towards peer counselling. Consequently, only 11% agreed to be having a positive attitude towards peer counselling and 75% disagreed on having a positive attitude towards peer counselling.

Table-2: Attitude towards Peer Counselling.

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
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8	I have a negative attitude towards peer counselling	79%	13%	8%
11	I have a positive attitude towards Peer Counselling	11%	75%	18%

This negative perception might be influenced by several factors for instance, some students may feel more comfortable when their issues are handled by adults who may be more experienced. This resonates with Fischer [14] who indicated that some students feel the need to seek help from their parents, teachers or specialists (counsellors). In addition, one of the participants said that:

“I would not wish to seek counselling from my peers. I would not tell them my problems because... what will my age mate tell me?”

Willingness influencing Perception

In this respect, some university students may feel more comfortable dealing with adults because their own peers may not have as much help to offer. This resonates with Wivell and Hinson [15, 16] who indicated that, help seeing behaviour refers to the extent to which a person utilizes different external sources against a situation that threatens his or her normal life functions, in order to reach or re-establish equilibrium.

Upon realizing problems, people attempt to solve them from social support resources. Primarily, people choose to receive help from their close relatives or family; and if this does not work well they shift to professional help. Similarly, individuals believe that, people may have negative perception towards counselling when their social support network is degraded and when they chose not to share information about their negative feelings [16].

However, on willingness as shown in Table-3, it was surprising to discover that in response to the item “I would be willing to seek Peer Counselling when faced with issues”, the analysis showed that 17% agreed, 66% disagreed. Similarly, on whether the university students would be willing to work with peer counsellors to help solve their problems, a greater proportion - 59% disagreed while only 22% agreed to work with peer counsellors. The lack of willingness by university students to seek peer counselling indicates a negative perception on peer counselling.

Table-3: University Students Willingness towards Peer Counselling

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
2	I am willing to work with peer counsellors to help me solve my problems	22%	59%	19%
12	I would be willing to seek Peer Counselling Services when faced with issues	17%	66%	17%

Experience influencing perception

While it is assumed that both the university students are in the same developmental stage and hence would appreciate peer counselling, the findings of the study revealed that majority of the participants had negative perception on all positive items. This finding thus contradicted the expected perception of university students on peer counselling. However perception can also be determined by experience. According to Taveria

et al., [17] our experience influences our perception and by extension our behaviour. It is therefore likely that the participants who had negative experiences when utilizing peer counselling, may view peer counselling negatively and vice versa. Similarly Tan, Naylor and Varenhorst [18-20] stipulated that, when people perceive a service or an action positively, they are likely to repeat it unlike when they perceive it negatively.

Table 4: University Students Management on Issues

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
6	I cannot manage my problems without attending peer counselling	31%	53%	17%

Positive and negative perception was revealed by the way the participants responded to item 6 as shown in Table-4, on managing issues. 31% agreed while, 53% disagreed which means that, majority did not require peer counselling to manage their issues. This means that 31 % of the participants who perceived peer counselling positively would manage their problems effectively hence would have a positive perception towards peer counselling. Managing one’s problems would be important to a student because when a student has many issues they may not be able to concentrate on their academic work which is their main reason of being at the university.

FACTORS AFFECTING PERCEPTION BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Negative perception could be attributed to many factors among them social stigma, ignorance, embarrassment and fear.

Social Stigma

According to Wester and Deane [21, 22], social stigma is defined as the fear that others will judge

a person negatively if she or he sought help for a problem. Similarly, social stigma attached to seeking help has been viewed as a barrier to PCS and individuals tend to be negative towards the services in these basis.

University students who are in a developmental stage where conformity is a psychological need would wish to portray a strong behaviour and not a weakness, at the same token they may thus fear to be stigmatised as weak. Traditionally seeking counselling may be viewed as a weakness by peers especially those that are able to cope with their issues. In addition fear the treatment involved in seeking a service is another possible cause of avoidance towards utilization of peer counselling. The students would fear to be labelled.

According to Kushner [23] treatment fears have been defined as a subjective state of apprehension arising from aversive expectations surrounding the seeking of help. Traditionally, university students seek to conform to their peers and would fear to be labelled as emotionally weak. Being labelled may work against the students' association with their peers as they may shy off from and withdraw from peer counselling

activities. As a result of this kind of fear, some university students preferred to keep their issues to themselves. For example a quote below from one of the participant who said,

"I may not feel comfortable telling "strangers" my personal issues"

The above quote may mean that there are the university student had negative perception on PCS based on fear of disclosing his issues to his peers. According to Vogel [24] self-disclosure is an act of a person to reveal their feelings, thoughts and attitudes to another person. An individual may not be able to self-disclose if they person does not feel comfortable to share their issues. Self-disclosure is only possible where there is sufficient understanding between individuals and also where there is maximum trust among the parties concerned. However where self-disclosure is possible counselling is more effective. This is similar to Kamiya *et al.*, [25] who stipulate that, fear to discuss painful emotions may be a contributing factor towards individuals' utilization of peer counselling.

Embarrassment

Table-5: Factors Affecting perception: Embarrassment

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
4	I feel embarrassed to attend Peer counselling sessions	62%	22%	16%

In the current study, some participants 62 % suggested that they would be embarrassed to seek help from peer counsellors and only 22% felt that they would not consider embarrassment as a problem that would hinder them from seeking help from peer counsellors.

Counselling and Psychotherapy has been described as "potentially difficult, embarrassing, and overall risky service which is avoided by some individuals" [24] citing [23]. However, in the current study there were 22% of the participants who did not consider embarrassment as a hindrance towards utilization of PCS, which would be said to be against the general perception that counselling is for emotionally weak people who are unable to cope with their issues. Similarly, the 62% of those that viewed embarrassment as a hindrance towards utilization of peer counselling, may be demotivated because the university students are in a developmental stage where conforming to others is important to them and they would hate to be viewed as emotionally weak by their peers.

In addition, Lawler [26] describes being embarrassed as a social rule and context which makes an individual feel ashamed to do an activity that they would otherwise do. It is likely that the students feel embarrassed to utilize peer counselling for fear of being

perceived as weak by their peers. This may mean that the individual is not able to cope with challenges they face and therefore weak. Similarly, students feel shame and guilt when they seek psychological help. They hate to be seen by their colleagues attending counselling services [26]. The student could feel stigmatized. Stigma makes contributes to the feeling of embarrassment. The 22% of the participants who did not attach the issue of embarrassment to their perception of PCS may be because they value the benefits of undertaking peer counselling and therefore perceive peer counselling positively. Similarly, when students understand the severity of their issues, they may overlook the issue of embarrassment and hence perceive PCS positively.

DISTRESS

However, the study also found out that there were few participants perceived peer counselling positively. The percentage of those with positive perception on PCS was mainly the ones who tended to seek relieve from distress (48%) compared to the (37%) with negative perception on distress, otherwise participants perceived PCS negatively, going by their responses to the questions asked. Feelings of distress are common among people including university students. In addition, university students' distress may mainly be due to the psychological demands of their

developmental stage [24]. Other issues causing distress to the university students include: academic, career problems as well as family concerns. Accordingly,

university students who may seek peer counselling to alleviate their distress may be influenced to do so by their level of willingness.

Table-6: Factors affecting perception - Distress

S/N	ITEMS	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
1	When distressed I think of peer counselling services as the first help	48%	37%	16%

Since perception is determined by experience as stipulated by our experience influence our perception and by extension our behaviour [17]. It is therefore likely that the participants who had positive experiences when utilizing PCS, may have viewed PCS positively. Willingness, trust and availability of the peer counsellors are major factor that contribute towards positive perception. University students tended to trust their peers more readily than they would older people and this is because they do experience similar developmental issues and therefore are likely to understand each other better. This feeling of

understanding another person’s issues is termed as empathy. According to Reed [27], empathy is concerned with an individual’s experience to be understood since it a human condition which imposes common cultural heritage with common goals and sharing. Empathy brings the conscious and unconscious components into one’s world. It is possible that peer counsellors offer empathy to the students and may be the reason for their positive perception on PCS.

Gender affecting Perception

Table-7: Perception by Gender

Perception	Gender	
	Female	Male
Positive Perception	69%	31%
Negative Perception	44%	56%

The study established that there were more female with positive perception on than male. With 69% of the females and only 31% males with positive perception.

difference in the way male and female are socialized may influence the university students’ perception on peer counselling services. In addition Boulton [30], added that 75% of those that utilized PCS on the issue of bullying were girls

This can be explained by the fact that females are more likely to talk about their issues than male. According to Hayes [28] women had more role constraints than men and also had diminishing societal stereo typing which has necessitated women to seek help more readily than men. We understand female undergo more psychological distress than male which is based on the fact that female have the biological responsibility of child bearing and also family wellbeing. In addition, women have equal responsibility with men on search for career path. This adds to the strains that a female experiences [28]. Similarly Wischmann [29] carried out a study on stresses arising from infertility of couples and found out that more women than men sought counselling to cope with the infertility stresses than men. This study shows that the

According to Boulton [30] twice as many women than men sought counselling, adding that traditionally, more women than men sought counselling in general because men and women are socialized differently globally, with women finding it easier to talk about their issues than men. This resonates with a survey commissioned by the British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists [31] which found that, female do talk about their issues more than men. They are more likely to share with their counsellor than men. The female university student may be more likely to perceive PCS positively than male as they search for coping skills for their personal and societal demands.

Year of Study affecting Perception

Table-8: Year of Study and Perception

Perception	Year of Study	
	Third	Four

Perception	Year of Study	
	Third	Four
Positive Perception	49%	51%
Negative Perception	73%	27%

In addition, the study also found out that 51% of the fourth year students had a positive perception towards PCS as compared to third years. There were 73% third years with negative perception compared to 27% of the fourth years with negative perception. This means that fourth years perceived peer counselling positively compared to the third years. This was so, probably because fourth years have gained much more experiences at the university in their previous years, which include; the awareness of the existence of peer counselling and a need more seriousness in career search. It is also assumed that the fourth year students are more likely to be anxious of life after university as compared to the third years. Furthermore, fourth year students being more mature developmentally, than third years may have a better understanding of peer counselling and hence perceive the services more positively. Similarly, fourth years do struggle in establishing career and employment as they graduate from the university and enter into the job market because there is high job market competition which puts pressure on the university students to perform better. According to Mungai and Osomu [29], there is an ever increasing unemployment for the youths in Kenya. Success in academic work increases the opportunity for job market. Job competition and preparation for interviews are challenges fourth years have to contend with and this probably would make the students seek peer counselling.

A fourth year student had reported in this study as saying:

Peer Counselling has helped me a lot as the counsellor understands me well when I talk about poor performance and need to do better and graduate so that I can get a job. I need money for my upkeep and for helping my family members who look up to me.....I come from a not very well to do family. Communication and relational issues with my family members worry me.

ROLE OF UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN INFLUENCING POSITIVE PERCEPTION

Negative perception could be attributed to many factors among them social stigma, ignorance, embarrassment and fear. University students who are in a developmental stage where conformity is a psychological need would wish to portray a strong behaviour and not a weakness, at the same token they may thus fear to be stigmatised as weak. Traditionally seeking counselling may be viewed as a weakness by peers, especially those that are able to cope with their issues, as most university students seek to conform to their peers and would fear to be labelled as emotionally

weak, they tend to perceive peer counselling negatively. Being labelled may work against the students' association with their peers as they may shy off from and withdraw from peer counselling activities. As a result of this kind of fear, some university student's preferred to keep their issues to themselves. For example a quote below from one of the participants who said,

"I may not feel comfortable telling "strangers" my personal issues"

The University management should support and facilitate in creation of an environment which supports peer counselling services amongst the university students. With the university management being involved in certain activities like sponsoring of motivational talks for the students, supporting controlled inter-university exchange programs and outings which will encourage peer counselling activities in the university.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from the findings of the study, it can be concluded that unlike what is expected in perception of university students on PCS, the study found on the contrary. Majority of the students perceived PCS negatively. Some of the reasons that the participants cited for negative perception included, ignorance, fear, social stigma and lack of trust of peer counsellors among others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The university management was recommended to facilitate relevant trainings for the peer counsellors to enhance their competence, as well as continuous supervision by the trained counsellors. Maintaining ethical issues like confidentiality will encourage trust for students to seek PCS more. Peer counselling activities need to be encouraged and guided by acceptable codes of conduct. These activities should be left to students to run with minimum adult intrusion.

Peer counsellors have the responsibility to listen to the issues of their peers who come to them for help. They also are expected to refer the students' issues that are beyond their competence to the university counsellors. This helps to maintain a balance between emotional wellbeing of the students and the understanding peer counselling issues by the university management. For this reason, peer counsellors should endeavour to remain as professional and ethical as much as possible to enhance the trust of the students. The study thus recommends that peer counsellors should undertake all trainings offered by the university

management and maintain a close working relationship with the University administration. Peer counsellors should also participate in the sensitization of PCS activities to the students as much as possible.

The university students are recommended to try as much as possible to adhere to the sensitization activities of PCS offered at the university.

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