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Seeking the help of school counselors: Cross-cultural differences in mothers' knowledge, attitudes, and help-seeking behavior



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ABSTRACT

Seeking help from a school counselor can have a crucial impact on the well-being of both adolescents and their families. Help-seeking is often undertaken by parents who recognize their child's need. Immigrant adolescents may have special need of such services, but their parents are less likely to seek help than those in majority groups. This study compared the propensity of immigrant mothers and Israeli-born Jewish mothers ($n = 172$) to seek help from the school counselor for their adolescent children. More specifically, using a mixed method design, it measured knowledge of the counselor's role, attitudes to formal help-seeking and help-seeking behavior.

Immigrant mothers reported less knowledge of school counseling, had less positive attitudes about help-seeking, and reported less help-seeking behavior than Israeli-born mothers. Our findings suggest attitudes and knowledge about help-seeking positively relate to help-seeking behavior. The latter plays a significant role in predicting the help-seeking behavior of immigrant mothers. The results expand our understanding of the maternal help-seeking process and highlight the need for intervention programs aimed at increasing parental knowledge of the role of school counselors, especially among immigrants.

Introduction

Research indicates that many adolescents with mental health problems do not receive help (Cotter et al., 2015; Rothi & Leavey, 2006; Zwaanswijk, van der Ende, Verhaak, Bensing, & Verhulst, 2003), leading to a phenomenon called a “service gap”. The lack of service utilization can often be traced to parents' hesitation to seek help for their children. Parents play a significant role in the help-seeking process as primary decision-makers and gate-keepers of service use (Logan & King, 2001; Reardon et al., 2017; Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Rothi & Leavey, 2006; Zwaanswijk et al., 2003). The factors related to seeking help for children are important to theorists and practitioners, as understanding the potential barriers to service use may help to close the service gap. This may be especially important for immigrant parents, as they may not know how to get help, and/or may have a negative view of help-seeking behavior.

Many adolescents and parents prefer to seek help within the school instead of or before seeking it in the wider community (e.g. Barker & Adelman, 1994; Harrison, McKay, & Bannon, 2004), making school counselors an important help source, with enormous potential to assist this population through either direct counseling or referral. We know very little about the actual process of seeking help from school counselors and the factors leading to it, however. Drawing on previous findings that service utilization rates differ across cultural groups (Gross, Baum, & Oved-Or, 2009; Rothi & Leavey, 2006; Selkirk, Quayle, & Rothwell, 2014), our study focuses

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on cultural differences between FSU immigrant mothers and Israeli mothers in seeking counseling services for their children. It considers two factors that may affect parental help-seeking: knowledge of the counseling profession and attitudes to help-seeking (Andersen, 1995; Eiraldi, Mazucca, Clarke, & Powerm, 2006; Rothi & Leavey, 2006).

Little is known about the help-seeking of immigrant parents, with many studies focusing on “willingness to seek help” as a behavioral indicator. Such studies show that immigrant parents from the FSU are less willing than Israeli-born parents to seek help for their children from the school counselor (Shor, 2006), but intentions do not necessarily predict or reflect help-seeking practices or service utilization (Oh & Bayer, 2015). To clarify the issue, we focused on past service utilization of mothers with both majority and immigrant backgrounds, not on future help-seeking intentions or willingness, as indicative of help-seeking behavior.

Cross-cultural differences in seeking help from school counselors

Cultural background is an important factor in the help-seeking process (Pham, Goforth, Chun, Castro-Olivo, & Costa, 2017). Rates of help-seeking among ethnic minority and immigrant groups are lower than among majority groups, though the need for help is similar and, at times, even higher (e.g. Abebe, Lien, & Elstad, 2017; Guo, Nguyen, Weiss, Ngo, & Lau, 2015). Given their numbers, immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) are of particular interest to Israeli researchers. The current number of immigrants from the FSU and their offspring is estimated to be just below one million (985,000 at the end of 2014), representing more than 15% of the Jewish population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This group is characterized by distinctive cultural values, practices, and characteristics, some of which remain salient after many years of living in Israel (Shor, 2006). Studies in Israel (e.g. Auslander, Sosklone, & Ben-Shahar, 2005; Gross et al., 2009) suggest individuals from this background show less willingness to seek help and have lower help-seeking rates than the majority population. These findings are especially alarming when it comes to immigrant adolescents, as in addition to immigration-related difficulties, they also face common developmental issues (Mirsky, Baron-Draiman, & Kedem, 2002; Titzmann & Lee, 2018). One study finds immigrant youth from the FSU feel less connected to their families and are more likely to suffer from a variety of psychological disorders than non-immigrant children (Dwairy & Dor, 2009). They also report less satisfaction with their lives and higher social alienation (Ullman & Tatar, 2001). School counselors could potentially provide much-needed help and support; that is, if students are willing to seek help either by themselves or with their parents.

Parental knowledge of school counselors

Parental knowledge of help services and treatment options is believed to have implications for service utilization (Eiraldi et al., 2006; Reardon et al., 2017; Reardon, Harvey, Young, O'Brien, & Creswell, 2018). Studies find parental knowledge varies across cultural groups (Auslander et al., 2005; Mendenhall & Frauenholtz, 2015; Sharlin, 1998). As immigrants move from their country of origin to the host country, they encounter different mental health and education systems. Lack of knowledge of the school counselor's professional role is the most commonly mentioned challenge faced by counselors working with students and parents with diverse backgrounds (Inman, Ngoubene-Atioky, Ladany, & Mack, 2009). To this point, however, parental knowledge of counseling services, in both immigrant and majority populations, has seldom been assessed in the literature.

Assessing the knowledge of immigrant parents from the FSU is of particular interest, given their large numbers. Notably, FSU schools are not likely to have counselors (Currie, Kuzmina, & Nadyuk, 2012), and immigrants to Israel may be reluctant to use a source that does not exist in their country of origin and of which they have little knowledge (Auslander et al., 2005; Sharlin, 1998; Shor, 2006). In a study of Russian immigrant families, almost 20% of the respondents indicated lack of information as the reason for their reluctance to seek help from social services (Sharlin, 1998). These studies suggest that FSU immigrant parents might not look for help for their children because they do not understand the role of the school counselor.

Help-seeking attitudes and help-seeking behavior

Help-seeking attitudes are believed to be shaped by the cultural values, norms and beliefs of a particular group; these, in turn, may affect help-seeking behavior (Cauce et al., 2002; Reardon et al., 2017). In general, ethnic minority and immigrant groups have less a positive opinion of seeking formal help than do native-born or majority populations (e.g. Arora, Metz, & Carlson, 2016; Loya, Reddy, & Hinshaw, 2010). Immigrants from the FSU are no exception (Brodsky, 1988; Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006). Some of the cultural beliefs of these immigrants may stem from the historical attributes of institutionalized services, including the mental health field, during the Soviet regime (Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006). During the Soviet period, the main sources of mental health treatment were psychiatrists; they dealt with more serious cases of mental health problems, while family physicians took care of less severe ones (Brodsky, 1988), but there were no school counselors. In addition, there were widespread rumors about the use of psychology and psychiatry as a tool to silence individuals who opposed the regime (Currie et al., 2012). If they still associate institutionalized services with risk, immigrants from the FSU may be reluctant to access such services.

Studies of individuals with Russian/Ukrainian backgrounds have shown that many among them consider seeking help from mental health professionals to be a sign of weakness and a last resort (Burlaka, Churakova, Aavik, Staller, & Delva, 2014; Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006). Some immigrants believe that instead of turning to professionals for help, a person should bear the responsibility alone, using various self-help techniques (e.g. reading a book or listening to music) or seek the help of family and close friends (Burlaka et al., 2014; Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006).

The roles of the school counselor in Israel

Israeli school counselors typically provide free on-site counseling and consultation services to students, parents, and teachers (Erhard, 2014; Tatar, 2010), but specific roles and time allocation differ across school districts and individual schools (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). According to the Psychological Counseling Service (2013), the Ministry of Education's supervising body of the counseling profession in Israel, a counselor's core role is to promote the well-being of the individual and the optimization of the school system. These can be achieved through the subcategories of *counseling*, *consultation*, *case-management*, *program-management* and *coordination* (Balshar, Altar, & Gal'on, 2013; Psychological Counseling Service, 2013).

The *counseling* function, traditionally considered the main role of the school counselor in Israel, pertains to individual and group sessions during which personal and academic issues, problems, processes, and events can be discussed in a confidential professional manner (Erhard & Harel, 2005; Erhard, 2014; Psychological Counseling Service, 2013). *Consultation* is the process whereby two or more individuals share professional knowledge and discourse regarding a third person or group of persons with whom the consultee works or interacts (Ramirez, Lepage, Kratochwill, & Duffy, 1998). Usually the clients are the educational staff, other professionals in the school or the community (e.g. social workers, therapists), and parents. *Case-management* includes the initiation, follow-up, and implementation of care at the school (Erhard, 2014; Psychological Counseling Service, 2013), especially for students with special needs, such as those with learning disabilities, gifted children, or immigrants (Psychological Counseling Service, 2013). *Program management* relates to the provision of useful, developmentally appropriate information to students and staff members, the prevention of risk behaviors, promotion of personal and social skills, and evaluation before and after program implementation (Balshar et al., 2013; Psychological Counseling Service, 2013). *Coordination* pertains to the counselor's two related but somewhat different functions as an intermediary between individuals within and outside the school. Within the school, this role may include mediation between students, parents, teachers, and other staff members (e.g. school psychologists). It also includes referring individuals to various bodies outside the school (e.g. social workers), whenever specific student, parent, or teacher needs are identified (Balshar et al., 2013; Psychological Counseling Service, 2013).

While there are official general guidelines for the role of school counselors, the counselor's actual role is flexible, subject to changes over time, and differs significantly among different counselors. The emphasis and time allocation vary, for example, as they are often tailored to meet specific school needs, the expectations of management, and the counselor's personal and professional worldviews (Erhard & Harel, 2005). As the counselor's role changes within and between schools, it may be unclear for parents; it may be especially vague for parents from a different country with a different educational system.

The current study

The goal of our study was to comparatively examine native-born and immigrant mothers with respect to their knowledge of, attitudes to, and help-seeking behavior from school counselors. Our aims were (1) to detect cross-cultural differences between maternal knowledge, attitudes and behavior and (2) to see if these were related to service utilization. Based on the literature review, we hypothesized that immigrant mothers would have lower self-reported knowledge of the school counselor's profession (H1), have less favorable attitudes towards seeking help for their children (H2), and be less likely to report help-seeking behavior (service utilization) (H3) than Israeli-born mothers. Attitudes to seeking help and knowledge would be positively related to help-seeking behavior (H4), and culture would be a moderator of knowledge of and attitudes to school counselors and help-seeking behavior (H5).

Method

Participants

Participants were 172 mothers of adolescents (aged 11–18) from two main cultural backgrounds: Jewish mothers born in Israel whose parents were also born in Israel ($n = 86$; $M_{age} = 44.99$, $SD = 4.33$, age range 35–55) and mothers who were born in the FSU ($n = 86$; $M_{age} = 42.21$, $SD = 6.21$, age range 28–60). Immigrant mothers were younger than Israeli-born mothers ($t(162) = 3.25$, $p < .01$). Immigrant mothers also reported significantly lower income levels than Israeli-born mothers ($\chi^2(4) = 15.47$, $p < .01$); 16.3% reported much below average income (versus 9.3% of the Israeli-born mothers); 18.8% reported below average income (versus 9.3% of the Israeli-born mothers); 35% reported average income (versus 24% of the Israeli-born mothers); 22.5% reported above average income (versus 29.3% of the Israeli-born mothers); 7.5% reported much higher than average income (versus 28% of the Israeli-born mothers). No significant difference was found in the education level ($\chi^2(2) = 1.35$, $p = .51$).

The sample was diverse in terms of geographic location: participants were from 32 cities in five districts of Israel. The five districts are listed below, with percentages presented in parentheses for immigrant and Israeli-born mothers respectively: North (20%, 42.5%); Haifa (32.5%, 27.1%); Center (47.1%, 23.8%); Jerusalem (1.2%, 1.3%); South (4.7%, 0%). Immigrant mothers tended to come from the center of Israel, and Israeli-born mothers tended to come from the north ($\chi^2(4) = 17.19$, $p < .01$).

For the immigrant mothers, the average number of years living in Israel was 17.99 ($SD = 7.47$, range 1–40 years); 7.1% had lived in Israel for 10 years or less, 45.7% for 11–20 years, 34.6% between 21 and 30 years, and 4.9% more than 30 years. The majority of immigrant mothers arrived as adults (80.2%); that is, their educational socialization occurred abroad.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in Hebrew and Russian (following a double translation procedure). Mothers of students in junior-high and high schools were recruited in the following ways (percentages shown in parentheses are for immigrant and Israeli-born mothers respectively): parent-teacher evenings (60.5%, 53%), referrals of acquaintances (29.1%, 33.7%), and online recruitment through unpaid posts in social media for parents (the post stated the general subject of the study was “questions related to motherhood to adolescents”; 10.5%, 13.3%). No significant differences were found between the three recruitment methods in terms of cultural background, age, income and education levels, and the main study variables (with the exception of higher rates of help-seeking behavior among the participants recruited online than by other methods). Data collection took place between December 2013 and May 2014. Approval was obtained before data collection from the review board of the Ministry of Education on November 6th 2013; the approval number is 7836.

Measures

Knowledge of the school counseling profession. Knowledge of the role and profession of the school counselor was assessed using two open-ended questions (“What is included in the school counselor’s role, in your opinion?” and “Which cases does the school counselor handle?”) and a closed-ended question asking the participant to rate her knowledge of the counselor’s role at school from 1 (*I know exactly what he/she does*) to 4 (*I don't know what the counselor does/I'm unfamiliar with this profession*).

Content analysis was conducted using qualitative data coded in a quantitative way (Chi, 1997), thus reflecting a broad definition of mixed method design (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Our aim was to understand what the mothers knew about the school counselor and then to organize the knowledge into categories. To do so, we developed a data-driven protocol (Syed & Nelson, 2015). First, the content of the knowledge was extracted from randomly sampled questions. Second, the content of these questions was discussed in detail in lab meetings. Categories to organize the content were suggested and were decided after thorough discussion. Third, two independent coders blinded to the participant’s cultural group coded the data based on the categories; whenever a category appeared in the data, the coders gave the score 1. This procedure allowed us to transform qualitative data into numbers for statistical analysis (see, for example, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001).

Three categories emerged from the content analysis: counseling roles; counseling populations; the types of cases the counselor attends to. As suggested by Syed and Nelson (2015), inter-rater reliability analysis was conducted on data for 20 participants; this yielded high kappa values and agreement rates between coders (for role categories: kappa = .97 and agreement rate = 98.04%; for types of counseling populations: kappa = .88 and agreement rate = 93.1%; and for number of different cases mentioned: kappa = .88 and agreement rate = 90%).

Responses to each of the three analysis categories (populations, role categories, cases) received quantitative scores according to the total number of categories a participant mentioned for each one. If participants left the open-ended questions blank and indicated in the closed-ended question that they were not familiar with the counselor’s role, they received the minimal score (0) for the quantitative categories that were left blank. Finally, each participant received a total score based on the mean of the standardized z-scores of the three items.

Attitudes towards seeking formal help were measured using 24 items of the Inventory of Attitudes towards Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMHS) developed by Mackenzie, Knox, Gekozki, and Macaulay (2004) as an adaptation and an extension of the classic measure by Fischer and Turner (1970), Attitudes towards Seeking Professional Help Scale (ATSPPHS). A sample item is: “Psychological problems, like many things, tend to work out by themselves”. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*I disagree*) to 4 (*I agree*). Internal consistency for Israeli-born mothers was .82 and for immigrant mothers .84.

Service utilization was assessed using a closed-ended question: “Have you or your child ever used the counseling services at school?” The responses yielded a dichotomous value of service use: participants received either 0 (*did not use the service/children weren't in counseling*) or 1 (*used the service/children were in counseling*).

Demographic questions included maternal age, immigration-related information (year of immigration, country of origin), maternal educational level, household income, and children’s ages (to confirm that they were adolescents).

Results

Group differences in knowledge, attitudes and help-seeking behavior

Chi-square tests were conducted on the categories identified within the roles and populations categories to check for group differences in knowledge. The results are presented in Table 1.

School counselor roles

As seen in Table 1, the most commonly mentioned role subcategory in our sample was *counseling*, with a majority in both samples mentioning it. Even so, Israeli-born mothers were significantly more likely to mention counseling than immigrant mothers. More Israeli-born mothers also mentioned *consultation* as a role subcategory. No significant group differences were found for the other role subcategories, although Israeli-born mothers mentioned more roles in each category than immigrant mothers. Finally, the immigrant mothers significantly differ from the Israeli-born mothers in the last subcategory; over a third of the immigrant mothers but none of the Israeli-born mothers said they were unfamiliar with the counseling profession or did not mention any roles.

Table 1
Comparison of Israeli-born and immigrant mothers' knowledge composed of role, counseling populations and case types of school counselors.

Categories	Subcategory	Examples	PerIs	PerIm	X ² test
Role categories	Counseling	“Conducting conversations with students”	92.6	65.8	(1, N = 157) = 17.36**
	Consultation	“Consultation with teachers/educational staff regarding children”	49.4	25	(1, N = 157) = 9.94*
	Case management	“Observing and following up on children with special needs”	46.9	36.8	(1, N = 157) = 1.63
	Program management	“Leading risk-behavior prevention programs”	23.5	11.8	1, N = 157) = 3.61†
	Mediation	“Mediation between the management to the student”	18.5	11.8	(1, N = 157) = 1.35
	Coordination	“Referral to mental health services”	11.1	7.9	(1, N = 157) = .47
Counseling populations	No roles/not familiar with the roles of the counselor	“I haven't heard about this profession”	0	31.6	(1, N = 157) = 30.2**
	Students	“Children”; “students”	87.7	60.3	(1, N = 159) = 15.59**
	Parents	“Parents of students”	34.6	20.5	(1, N = 159) = 3.92†
	Educational staff	“Principal”; “teachers”	18.5	9	(1, N = 159) = 3.04
	No counseling populations mentioned		11.1	39.7	(1, N = 159) = 17.58**
Cases types	General answer	“Problematic issues”	58	44	(1, N = 156) = 3.07
	Social issues	“Help students in cases of difficulties with their peers”	43.2	34.7	(1, N = 156) = 1.19
	Academic issues	“Bad academic progress”	40.7	41.3	(1, N = 156) = 1.35
	Behavioral issues	“Aggression”	37	21.3	(1, N = 156) = 4.62*
	Delinquency	“Drag and alcohol use”	35.8	17.3	1, N = 155) = 11.28*
	Special needs	“Need for didactic diagnosis”	24.7	6.7	(1, N = 156) = 12.38*
	Family issues	“Help students in case of difficulties with their parents”	22.2	13.3	1, N = 156) = 2.89
	Developmental problems	“When a child is outside the norm”	13.6	2.7	(1, N = 156) = 6.07*
	Psychological issues	“Help a child with psychological problem”	11.1	22.7	(1, N = 156) = .006
	Vocational counseling	“Counseling which academic program to choose”	11.1	5.3	(1, N = 156) = 1.7
	Adjustment to new class	“Help children to adapt to their new class”	6.2	6.7	(1, N = 156) = .2
	Financial problems	“Financial aid”	4.9	2.7	(1, N = 156) = .54
	Medical problems	“Student illness”	1.2	0	(1, N = 156) = .93
	No counseling populations mentioned		1.2	26.7	(1, N = 156) = 21.62**

Note: PerIs = Percentage of Israeli-born mothers who mentioned this category; PerIm = Percentage of immigrant mothers who mentioned this category.

† $p < .1$.

* $p < .01$.

** $p < .001$.

Counseling populations

As seen in Table 1, the majority of both samples mentioned students as a counseling population, with Israeli-born mothers mentioning this subcategory significantly more often than immigrant mothers. No significant group differences were found for the counseling populations, but Israeli mothers tended to mention more counseling population subcategory. Finally, over a third of the immigrant mothers but only 11.9% of the Israeli-born mothers did not mention any counseling population at all. This difference was significant.

Case types

Responses were analyzed in terms of the type of cases that the counselor deals with. As seen in Table 1, a significant portion of both samples provided a general, non-specific answer, such as “different problems”, “problematic issues”, and “various difficulties”. The most common specific issue subcategories mentioned by mothers in the Israeli-born sample were social issues, followed by academic issues, behavioral issues, and delinquency. The most frequently mentioned issues by immigrant mothers were academic problems, followed by social issues, psychological issues, and behavioral issues. Most subcategories were mentioned more often by Israeli-born mothers, with delinquency, special needs, and developmental problems significantly more prevalent among Israeli-born mothers. More than a quarter of the immigrant mothers did not mention any types of cases or said they didn't know what cases a counselor dealt with; only 1.2% of Israeli-born participants responded in this way. This difference was found to be significant.

Our first hypothesis on reported knowledge (H1) was confirmed: Israeli-born mothers received significantly higher scores on their reported knowledge ($M = .17$) than immigrant mothers from the FSU ($M = -.25$), ($t(160) = 3.25, p < .01$). Our second hypothesis (H2) was supported as well ($t(167) = 2.5, p < .05$). Israeli-born mothers had more positive attitudes ($M = 2.83$) about seeking help for their children than immigrant mothers from the FSU ($M = 2.63$). Our third hypothesis on help-seeking behavior (H3) or service utilization was also confirmed. A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between cultural background and service use. While more than half of the Israeli-born mothers had previously used school counseling for their children (56.6%, $n = 47$), less than a third of the immigrant mothers (30.59%, $n = 26$) had done so ($\chi^2(1, N = 168) = 11.59, p < .01$).

Table 2
Results of logistic regression analysis predicting help-seeking behavior (service utilization).

	Predictor	B	SE B	Wald's X^2	df	Odds ratio	95% CI
Step 1	Age	.07	.04	4.39	1	1.08*	1.01–1.15
	Income	-.02	.15	.02	1	.98	.73–1.32
	Cultural background	.19	.92	.04	1	1.20	.19–7.28
	Residence	1.69	1.51	1.22	1	5.31	.28–102.39
Step 2	Help-seeking attitudes	.77	.38	4.05	1	2.16*	1.02–4.58
	Knowledge	.77	.28	7.65	1	2.15**	1.25–3.70
Step 3	Attitudes * cultural background	-.68	.80	.72	1	.51	.10–2.44
	Knowledge * cultural background	1.19	.58	4.29	1	3.29*	1.07–10.19

Note: CI-confidence interval.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Part 2: predicting service utilization - cultural differences

The final goal of our study was to examine the role of cultural background, reported knowledge, and attitudes in predicting service utilization (H4). We performed hierarchical binary logistic regression using a dependent dichotomous variable of service utilization (utilized counseling services vs. did not utilize counseling services). In step 1, we entered the demographic variables of age, income and cultural background. As a recent meta-analysis showed acculturation might affect help-seeking norms in some minority groups (Sun, Hoyt, Brockberg, Lam, & Tiwari, 2016), we controlled for residence time by calculating the proportion of a person's life lived in Israel (Israeli-born mothers scored 1, and immigrant mothers scored a fraction calculated as the time in Israel divided by their age). In step 2, we added the predicting variables: reported attitudes towards and knowledge of seeking help from the school counselor for one's children. In step 3, we added interactions between cultural background and attitudes and between cultural background and reported knowledge.

The entire model yielded a statistically significant value, indicating that, as a set, the predictors distinguished between those who sought help for their children and those who did not ($\chi^2(8, N = 146) = 31.67, p < .001$). The model was able to explain 28.6% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), and the success rate for the prediction of service utilization was 67.2% (success rates were identical for predicting those who sought help and those who did not). As shown in Table 2, our results indicate that, as hypothesized, knowledge and help-seeking attitudes are significantly able to predict actual service utilization.

To test our last hypothesis (H5), we checked the data for interactions between cultural background and reported knowledge, as well as between cultural background and help-seeking attitudes and behavior. We found no interaction between attitudes and cultural background, but there was a significant interaction between knowledge and cultural background. When we probed the interaction (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991; Hayes, 2012), we found that for immigrant mothers from the FSU, an increase in reported knowledge increased the likelihood of service utilization ($B = 1.29, p < .01$). No such relationship existed for Israeli-born mothers ($B = .39, p = .28$).

Discussion

Our study focused on help-seeking by immigrant and Israeli-born mothers with the aim of increasing our understanding of the facilitators of and barriers to seeking counseling for their children and reducing the “service-gap”, especially for immigrant families.

Differences between immigrant and Israeli-born mothers

Our three hypotheses on group differences were supported by our findings: compared to the Israeli-born mothers, the immigrant mothers were less familiar with the counseling services, had less positive attitudes about seeking help, and were less likely to have actually used the school counseling service (help-seeking behavior). In general, immigrant mothers were familiar with a narrower range of counselor roles, populations, and cases than their native-born comparators. Moreover, for all school counseling categories (role, populations, cases) the percentage of immigrant mothers who reported that they completely lacked knowledge was significantly higher than the percentage of Israeli-born mothers. In fact, about third of the immigrant mothers said they knew nothing about the school counselor profession. It is possible that immigrant mothers grew up in an educational system which did not include counselors as service providers in schools, and this may explain their lack of knowledge of and familiarity with the school counseling profession. In addition, language difficulties and a limited circle of social and information sources (Sharlin, 1998; Shor, 2006) might stand in the way of knowledge acquisition. Lastly, as immigrant mothers reported lower socio-economic status than Israeli-born mothers, the schools in which their children are enrolled may provide partial or deficient counseling services; therefore, their knowledge of counseling services or their actual use of school counseling might be reduced.

Our findings also point to differences in the attitudes of Israeli-born and immigrant mothers. Attitudinal differences to seeking formal help may be partially explained by the particular history of the mental health field in the Soviet era and the stigma and distrust associated with it (Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006; Sharlin, 1998). Other studies report negative attitudes to seeking formal help among

large segments of the FSU immigrant population in general (e.g. Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006). We have extended this research by tapping into attitudes toward school counselor; future research should expand this line of investigation to other counseling and therapeutic fields.

In terms of help-seeking behavior, our finding that the immigrant mothers were less likely to seek help from school counselors than their Israeli-born counterparts accords with previous findings that immigrants from the FSU are less likely and less willing to seek formal help from a variety of sources, including school counselors (Auslander et al., 2005; Shor, 2006). Seeking help might be perceived as a sign of weakness and as a last resort (Burlaka et al., 2014). Our work adds to the literature by focusing on actual behavior rather than on the intention to engage in such behavior. Another explanation of the reluctance of immigrants to seek mental health care is that their priorities are not focused on enhancing psychological well-being, but on more basic needs, such as establishing themselves and their families economically. This suggests a number of factors may impact immigrants' help-seeking, including economic security.

The path to seeking help from the counselor

As hypothesized, cultural background, knowledge, and attitudes significantly distinguished those who utilized school counseling services from those who did not. With respect to *knowledge*, help-seeking behavior was less likely among those who were less familiar with the help source (i.e. FSU immigrant mothers). Other studies have similarly found that poor knowledge of available services and treatment options is a barrier to service utilization, especially for minorities and immigrants from a country where specific help sources do not exist (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Mendenhall & Frauenholtz, 2015; Rothi & Leavey, 2006; Selkirk et al., 2014). That being said, the relationship between knowledge and behavior could also be reversed: knowledge of services may be increased after help-seeking behavior has occurred (Mendenhall & Frauenholtz, 2015). According to this perspective, once parents seek help from the counselor, their knowledge increases as they become acquainted with the counselor and learn about his or her role.

Another variable related to behavior is *attitudes* towards seeking help. In line with previous research (ten Have et al., 2010), we found that help-seeking attitudes predicted service utilization among both the native-born and immigrant groups. Arguably, mothers with more positive attitudes to seeking formal help are more likely to seek help from a variety of sources, one of which is the school counselor. It is also possible that mothers who have used a specific service in the past, such as the school counseling service, develop more positive attitudes to seeking formal help in general (ten Have et al., 2010). This means that counselors who reach out to parents may have an opportunity to influence parental perceptions of a whole range of helping professions and encourage future help-seeking from other formal sources.

Our findings that knowledge and attitudes were related to behavior are encouraging; unlike cultural background, both variables are subject to relative change (i.e. have some degree of mutability; Andersen, 1995) and may therefore be affected by intervention programs. Specifically, since both predict service utilization, a potential change in behavior could be achieved by efforts focused directly at them. These may include intervention programs for parents and students explaining the potential benefits of seeking help, as well as programs to educate and inform parents about the role of the school counselor.

We found an interaction effect of cultural background on the relationship between knowledge and behavior; an increase in the knowledge of immigrant mothers was associated with increased help-seeking. There was no such association for the Israeli-born mothers. This finding supports the notion that the pathway to seeking help from a particular source might differ for different cultural groups (Eiraldi et al., 2006). For some (e.g. immigrants from the FSU), one variable (i.e. knowledge) may play a greater role in predicting help-seeking than for others (Israeli-born mothers).

One explanation of this finding is that for the majority population, a minimum level of knowledge may be required to seek help from the school counselor. All the Israeli-born mothers in our sample already possessed this knowledge. In contrast, FSU immigrant mothers dealing with new systems and services would not necessarily have had the knowledge required to seek and receive help. Moreover, newcomers, who often deal with financial and vocational insecurities, have fewer resources to acquire new knowledge. In our sample, immigrant mothers reported lower income levels than Israeli-born mothers. It is possible that worries about not being able to provide for the family's essential needs prevent mothers from seeking help for their children. In addition, some FSU immigrants tend to distrust institutions and help services (Polyakova & Pacquiao, 2006; Shor, 2006), especially those related to mental health. Greater knowledge of the role of the school counselor may help FSU immigrant mothers develop more trust in this help source. Familiarity with the core values of counseling, such as its focus on the well-being of children and the counselor's obligation for confidentiality, may increase credibility and trust. Greater knowledge may also help immigrant mothers distinguish the school counselor from other, negatively viewed and more stigmatized mental health professions (e.g. psychiatrists, psychologists). Moreover, they may feel more comfortable seeking help when they learn that counselors work with all types of students and that seeking help from counselors is a common, normative behavior.

Since directionality cannot be inferred, the interaction may stem from a ceiling effect of the extent to which knowledge is increased after counseling services are used. Israeli-born mothers may have more knowledge of counseling; this may explain why our participants' use of counseling services did not relate to their knowledge. However, immigrant mothers have less knowledge than Israeli-born mothers and may learn a lot about the counselor's role upon meeting him or her; indicatively, among our participants, those who had already used counseling for their children had much more knowledge than those who had not. Further investigation is required to determine the direction of the relationships between knowledge and behavior for each cultural background. It would also be interesting to see whether the interaction result can be replicated with other samples and other populations.

It is interesting to note that the findings were significant even after controlling for residence time in Israel. Although theory

suggests acculturation might be an important predictor of intergroup variability regarding adjustment (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Makarova & Birman, 2016), it seems that in this case, even after many years in Israel, immigrant mothers had different knowledge about, attitudes to and behavior regarding help seeking. Our results echo the findings of a meta-analysis of the relations between acculturation attitudes toward help-seeking in the US and other Western countries; this particular analysis found no significant effect for most ethnic groups (Sun et al., 2016). However, our results might also reflect a specific Israeli context. Acculturation might be more challenging in the Israeli culture, and residence time is not always related to better adjustment. For example, a recent study found that young adults who immigrate to Israel suffer from lower well-being than Israeli-born young adults even many years after their immigration (Sher-Censor, Benish-Weisman, Gal, & Karni, 2018).

Those seeking to account for the gap in knowledge and attitudes shown by immigrant mothers and their decreased service utilization should also consider the role of school counselors. A study of Israeli teachers found different perspectives on acculturation, with most expressing assimilative attitudes to immigrants in the schooling context (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2002). Some suggest these attitudes could interfere with relations with students (Tatar, Ben-Uri, & Horenczyk, 2011) and even with counselor-parent relations. When counselors do not take culture into account, they might see prevalent coping strategies among immigrants as deficits that need to be changed and thus have different desirable counseling outcomes (Huang, & Zane, *in press*). As a result, immigrants' knowledge, attitudes, and actual behavior might be impaired. To date, not all educational counseling programs in Israel offer a specific course on cross-cultural counseling. Such a course could enhance counselors' cross-cultural knowledge and competency, affecting their work with immigrant and minority students and their families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). We suggest this kind of training is essential to increase service utilization.

Study strengths, limitations and implications

School counseling can benefit students and their families, but not all students receive it. Our study aimed to identify some of the barriers that might prevent from mothers from seeking help for their children. By focusing on cross-cultural differences between Israeli-born and immigrant mothers, we were able to pinpoint some specific challenges faced by immigrant mothers in Israel.

Our study has several strengths. First, we found that knowledge of the counseling profession and attitudes to help-seeking generally determine those who seek help for their children and those who do not; we found a clear and troubling distinction between Israeli-born and immigrant mothers. Second, most previous studies have focused on willingness or intention to use counseling services, but we focused on actual behavior, as this might more closely reflect reality. Third, our mixed method design allowed us to conduct an in-depth examination of the content of mothers' knowledge of school counseling.

As with any research project, our study had some limitations. First, as mentioned above, we were unable to determine the causal relationship or the directionality of effect for attitudes and knowledge with service utilization. Longitudinal studies could assess the degree to which knowledge and attitudes change over time, as well as their direction and their interplay with service utilization, thus clarifying these relationships (ten Have et al., 2010). Second, some degree of bias might be expected, as service utilization data were based on self-reports provided by the mothers. Mothers were reassured that their responses were anonymous, and no identifying information was collected, but some may have felt uncomfortable admitting they had sought counseling for their children, particularly if they had a negative view of help-seeking or were ashamed of seeing a counselor. Nonetheless, in order to maintain confidentiality and since we were collecting information on attitudes and knowledge, self-report questionnaires seemed the best option.

Third, our sample was small, was not randomly sampled, and focused only on mothers. Although the sample was not randomly selected, sampled mothers came from different locations in Israel, thus increasing the sample's representativeness. With respect to the sample size, we were looking at an immigrant population, and this population is harder to approach in large numbers, especially when using a mixed method design. As for the gender issue, it has consistently been shown that gender is closely related to help-seeking attitudes and behavior (e.g. Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994; ten Have et al., 2010). Men express less positive attitudes to seeking help and are less likely to seek help from formal sources than women. Future studies could attempt to replicate our findings with a sample of fathers to determine whether help-seeking differs by gender.

Our findings also have a number of practical implications. Maternal knowledge, an important factor in seeking help from the school counselor, seems to be more limited among immigrants in Israel. Practicing counselors should take into account varying degrees of parental familiarity with their role when working with students from diverse backgrounds. They should be aware that parents' values and attitudes are affected by their cultural and historical backgrounds and should consider the larger socio-cultural context when working with immigrant populations (Pham et al., 2017). Immigrant parents, for instance, may view seeking help from the counselor (and/or from other mental health professionals) negatively and may be reluctant to seek or cooperate with counseling. Therefore, the school counselor should play an active but sensitive role, reaching out to parents.

Our study's findings can be used by educators, counselors, and policy makers in designing and evaluating intervention programs in the school and community. Interventions can be designed to tackle the factors related to service utilization (i.e., knowledge and attitudes), with a special consideration of the cultural background of the target population. Interventions designed for immigrant parents from the FSU, for example, should introduce the principles and characteristics of the school counseling profession, explain the differences between school counselors and psychologists or psychiatrists, and portray the school counseling service as confidential and safe for both students and parents.

Conclusion

Our study focused on the help-seeking behavior of Israeli-born and immigrant mothers of adolescents, specifically their knowledge of and attitudes to school counseling services and their propensity to seek out these services for their children. We observed differences in knowledge, attitudes, and service utilization between the two groups. Both knowledge of and positive attitudes towards counseling were positively related to service utilization, with lack of knowledge significantly negatively related the help-seeking process of the immigrant mothers. Overall, our findings indicate the need to conduct interventions at school and national levels to familiarize mothers with the counseling profession and to improve their attitudes towards seeking help for their children. These interventions are especially important for immigrants. But since changes in knowledge and behavior take time, even when appropriate programs are implemented, counselors and school administrators are encouraged to be proactive and reach out to parents in general (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014) and immigrant parents in particular to ensure adolescents and their families receive the assistance they require.

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