

Depression Literacy of Underserved Students, Gender Differences, and The Effects on Student Retention and Bachelor Degree Completion

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Background

There are more historically, underserved populations enrolled in colleges and universities, but these groups continue to disproportionality drop out of higher education institutions and have low or lengthy bachelor degree completion rates (Shapiro et al., 2017, p. 2). In this study, underserved populations include females, any person who does not identify as a white European American, first generation college students, and people from a lower socioeconomic background. Upon examination of current data on retention, and completion rates by race and gender, both male and female students of color had the lowest degree completion rates and highest dropout rates, with males of color having the highest dropout and lengthiest completion rates overall (Shapiro et al., 2017, p. 2). An influencing factor of underserved, undergraduate students' poor academic performance is depression (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2013, p. 5).

Underserved students have intersecting identities that make them especially vulnerable to suffer from depression. For example, first generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have substantial financial burdens and lack family support through their college experience which has been correlated to stress and depression experienced by these students (Belter et al., 2015, p. 91; Britt, Ammerman, Barret, & Jones, 2017, p. 26). Research by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors found that 36.4% of students suffered from depression; among students experiencing mental illnesses, only 40% seek help (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2013, p. 5; Kognito White Paper, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, of the students that seek help for mental health problems, most are women; influencing this disparity is that women diagnosed with depression more frequently disclose their symptoms to medical practitioners, are given this diagnosis, and seek and accept help (World Health Organization, 2000). However, this, holds true for non-Hispanic white women more than any other racial or ethnic classification (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). In addition cultural stigma in regards to mental health influences students decision to refrain from seeking help for their depression. It has been found that people who can recognize when they are suffering from depression are more likely to seek help when they can recognize this as a mental health problem that is treatable (Kutcher, Wei, & Coniglio, 2016, p. 155) This construct is called mental health literacy.

In this study, the recurring influence of gender and intersecting identities are considered while underserved students' knowledge on depression or depression literacy (a more specific form of mental health literacy), and the difference in this construct between men and women, was assessed using a Depression Literacy (hereafter, D-Lit) questionnaire to explore help seeking behaviors.

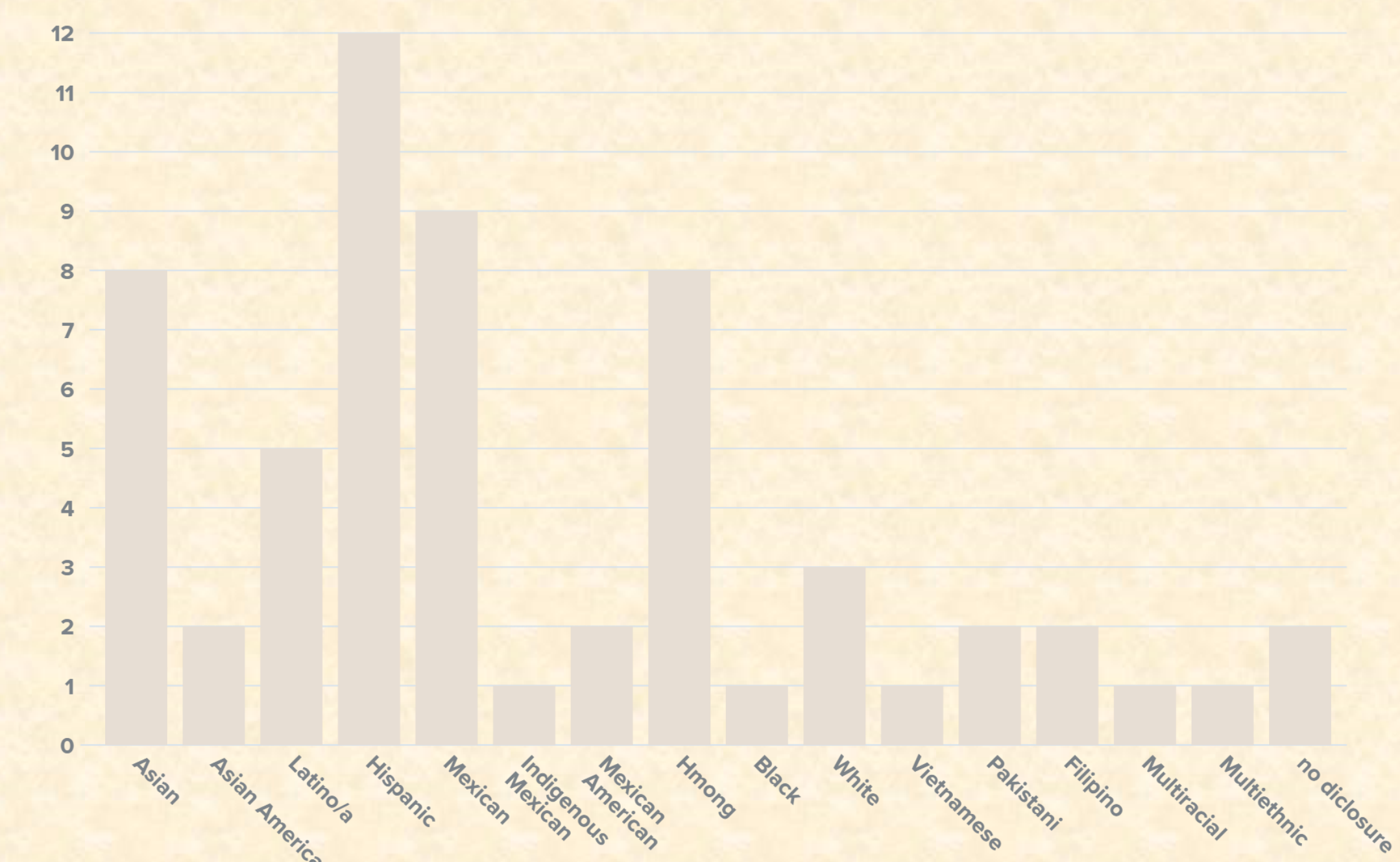
Methodology

- This study primarily involved quantitative research. This researcher collected the answers to the Depression Literacy questionnaire, hereafter, D-Lit created to assess university students' knowledge, or mental health literacy, on depression by Dr. Griffiths, emeritus professor from the Australian National University.
- The D-Lit consists of 23 items including an optional, qualitative question, "If I thought I were going through depression I would seek help by _____".
- Subjects were given a point for every correct answer for a total of 22 possible points. Questions 1-22 had true, false, and I don't know response options.
- The subjects were exclusively first and second year students from the Extended Opportunity Program, EOP, and were invited to participate in this study via email.
- Subjects read an informed consent form and were provided with the campus's psychological resources for their use if they felt personally affected by the study.
- Subjects also completed demographic questionnaire to identify their age, academic year, ethnic background/race, and gender.
- Collected data was entered to an excel spreadsheet for coding and analyzed using SPSS.

Quantitative Results

There were 60 participants in total, 48 identifying as women and 12 identifying as men; 42 first year students and 18 second year students. All students were over the age of 18 as required by the IRB. Per EOP program requirements, all students are first generation college students and have a low-income status. Below is a breakdown of the subjects' ethnic and racial backgrounds as they self identified in the demographical questionnaire.

Ethnic and Racial Demographics



There were no statistically significant correlations between gender and either item response or total assessment score when analyzed using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient. Being male or female did not result in a positive correlation in the level of depression literacy. Positive meaning the more correct answers the higher the score; thus, the higher the depression literacy score, the stronger the correlation between gender and depression literacy. The correlations for all participants ranged from -.23 to .14.

According to the Crosstabulation and a Pearson Chi Square, no statistically significant differences were observed in the frequency with males and females. For both statistical analyses the results ranged from .200 to .908. A T-test was also run and no statistically significant differences in assessment scores were observed between males and females ($t = 1.759$, $df = 58$, $p = .084$).

Qualitative Results

The quantitative data provided by subjects for the additional question, number 23 on the D-Lit, "If I thought I were going through depression I would seek help by _____", provided some insight into the individual's perspective on depression and their help seeking behavior. The responses to the question, such as, "I would go to counseling"- Asian, female subject, coincided with the literature supporting that women, are more likely to seek help than men. Men responded to this question with answers like, "I don't know what I would do, since I cannot relate. I may think that I would do something bright, but in the end it comes down to what I actually do in real life. Basically, a "idea vs. reality""- Asian male.

- Overall more females participated in this study than males
- The highest score for the depression literacy was of 12 out of 22 and it belonged to a female.
- The highest male score was of seven.
- Most females and males of various ethnic and racial backgrounds responded that they would talk to their families and friends, and a few mentioned religious or spiritual methods of coping with depression.

Conclusion

- The quantitative results of the study were not statistically significant regarding gender and depression literacy, but the qualitative results were consistent with the literature on depression and gender.
- Subjects demonstrated lack of knowledge regarding mental health services that can treat depression as they used the terms counselors and advisors when referencing who they would seek help from
- This may be due to lack of knowledge that many underserved communities have on mental health and may also reflect the lack of resources available to address these issues
- Scores were low for all individual participants which demonstrate their lack of depression literacy, many chose to respond don't know instead of true or false for the questions
- This supports the research that states underserved groups tend to have low mental health literacy, and in this case, this was true for the 60 participants in this study regarding depression per the D-Lit

Future Directions

- While there were no significant correlations found between gender and depression literacy for this study, future studies would benefit from obtaining a bigger sample size.
- Offering incentives and compensation might be especially helpful when conducting research on underserved students and obtaining a bigger sample size as there is direct benefits provided to the student.
- Changing the design of the questionnaire to a Likert scale could reveal gender differences that cannot be captured with the current true, false, and don't know format.
- It would be beneficial to include more qualitative research or conduct an individual all qualitative study in which subjects are interviewed. The single qualitative question in this study allowed deeper insight into the help seeking behaviors of these subjects.
- Conducting research to determine depression literacy differences between cultures and racial groups may also add deeper insight into gender difference between male and females if they have the same aforementioned backgrounds.

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