

# Effects of *Sekentei* on seeking psychological help in Japan: The interaction effects of moderating factors based on the theory of reasoned action

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**Abstract:** The underutilization of mental health services is severe in Japan, where people always try to conform to social norms and avoid shame. This tendency is called “*Sekentei*”. The present study investigated the effects of *Sekentei* on help-seeking intention toward psychological services and the interaction effects of moderating factors. A questionnaire was distributed to 273 undergraduates in Japan. A factor analysis showed that help-seeking intention was constructed from “help needs” and “seeking help without hesitation”, and “*Sekentei*” had significant negative effects on both of these factors. A four-way ANOVA with “help needs” as the dependent variable showed significant three-way interactions for “*Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of friends”, and “*Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends”. In addition, the three-way interaction effect for “*Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” on “seeking help without hesitation” was significant. These results showed the importance of the moderating factors. In particular, “subjective norms” may be a key to promoting psychological help-seeking in people with high concern for *Sekentei*.

**Keywords:** help-seeking intention, *Sekentei*, positive impression of counseling, subjective norms of family and friends

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## Introduction

Although mental health services are often helpful for those who experience psychological distress (Lambert, 2013), many who are in distress do not utilize such services, leading to a phenomenon called the “service gap” (Steffl & Prosperi, 1985). For example, only one in ten who suffer from mental health problems seeks medical attention (Kawakami et al., 2003), and only 3.8% of those who attempt suicide have consulted psychiatrists (The Asahi

Shimbun, 2007). In particular, Asians have a tendency to shy away from using social services (Nemoto, 1998).

Previous studies have shown that the underutilization of services are influenced by psychosocial factors, such as *Sekentei*, particularly in Japan. *Sekentei* is translated as “social appearance” or “appearance in the eyes of others” (Maruyama et al., 2011), and it is a key aspect of Japanese culture. *Sekentei* has been considered a main feature of Japanese behavioral principles, which has implications with

respect to whether people should conform to social norms and avoid shame or keep up social appearances (Inoue, 1977). *Sekentei* is associated with avoiding the use of care services for the elderly, due to fear of being judged negatively by others (Maruyama et al., 2011). Likewise, people may have similar concerns about seeking psychological therapy (Sibicky & Dovidio, 1986), and it is anticipated that they may have an aversion toward psychological services due to *Sekentei*. It is therefore important for service providers to understand psychological barriers that prevent the use of services, and explore ways to encourage utilization. The influence of *Sekentei* on seeking psychological help has not been empirically demonstrated in Japan. Thus, the first purpose of this study was to investigate the following hypothesis: high concern for *Sekentei* has negative effects on seeking psychological help.

If *Sekentei* has a negative impact on help-seeking, an exploration of methods to moderate the impact and promote help-seeking behavior is needed. The theory of reasoned action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) helps us to understand the process behind human social behavior and predict ways to change it. TRA is a popular model that has proven effective in explaining the driving forces behind human behaviors (Sheppard et al., 1988). According to this theory, the best predictor of behavior is a person's intention to perform or not perform the behavior, under the assumption that it is performed volitionally. Furthermore, intention is influenced by two factors: "attitude toward the behavior" and "subjective norms".

Attitude is defined as "evaluation or affect with respect to a psychological object", and said to be the main factor that influences people's thoughts and behaviors. The theory

emphasizes the importance of measuring attitudes that relate to one's performance of the behavior, but not performance in general. Since personal feelings are often reflected as a measurement for verbal expression of an attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), positive impressions of counseling was used to measure attitude toward seeking psychological help.

Subjective norms, on the other hand, are the perceived opinions or expectations of significant others and a person's preference to comply with them. The first component is normative belief, or the personal perception or belief that those who are important to the individual think s/he should or should not perform a particular behavior. The second component, in order to reflect the importance of referents, is motivation to comply, implying an individual's general motivation to comply with the referent. Subjective norm is obtained by multiplying an individual's normative belief by motivation to comply. Since it is expected that family and friends are important significant others for most people, subjective norms of family and friends were measured in this research.

It is said that attitude and subjective norm are equally important and that intention is best predicted when the two components coincide (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Previous studies have shown that these two factors largely explain help-seeking intention and behavior toward psychological services (e.g., Ogura & Imajo, 2011). However, it is unclear if these factors can moderate the negative effects of psychological barriers to seeking help. If a moderating effect is revealed, it could promote help-seeking behavior in people with high concern for *Sekentei*, which is deeply seated and difficult to change. Therefore, the present study investigates the moderating effect

of positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms of family and friends, by examining interaction effects of concern for *Sekentei*, positive impressions, and subjective norms on help-seeking intention. Because the correspondence of attitude and subjective norm is important, the second hypothesis was as follows: among people who have high positive impressions of counseling and positive subjective norms of family and friends, help-seeking intention remains high despite high concern for *Sekentei*.

We believe that there are two potential benefits of the present research. First, as previously mentioned, it is difficult to intervene in *Sekentei* because it is deeply ingrained in the minds of the Japanese (Inoue, 1977). Accordingly, investigating moderating factors will be beneficial in finding ways to mitigate the negative effects of *Sekentei*. Thus, clarifying the moderating effects of positive impressions and subjective norms can lead to interventions, such as public relations of psychological services or psycho-education for families. Second, it is important to explore moderating factors of psychological barriers because psychological distress has a positive association with treatment fear (Kushner & Sher, 1991). This means that psychological barriers are activated most when the level of distress rises. Therefore, seeking moderating factors and suggesting effective intervention strategies to promote help-seeking among persons with psychological barriers, will help to prevent the service gap.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 295 Japanese

undergraduate students, of whom 273 completed questionnaires. The average age was 20.7 ( $SD=1.24$ ), 127 (46.5%) were male, and 203 (74.4%) majored in math and science.

### *Procedure*

The questionnaires were handed out in classes or clubs on campuses of seven universities in central Japan. Participants completed the questionnaires in approximately 10 min and the questionnaires were collected by the examiner.

### *Measures*

*Help-seeking intention.* After receiving a vignette that described depressive symptoms, participants were asked to respond to the Help Receiving Intentionality Scale (Tamura & Ishikuma, 2001). They were instructed to picture themselves being in the presented situation. The Help Receiving Intentionality Scale consists of 11 items (rated on a 5-point scale from 1 = agree to 5 = disagree) and two subscales (“help needs” and “seeking help without hesitation”). Three items were excluded because of inadequacy in this research.

*Concern for Sekentei.* In order to measure concern for *Sekentei*, the Revised Edition of the Sekentei Scale (Momose & Asahara, 1997) was used. The scale consists of 17 items (rated on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = absolutely disagree) and four subscales including “derogation”, “agreeableness”, “appearance”, and “respect for family”. This scale was originally constructed for studying the elderly, and it has been used in studies that target middle-aged people and older (e.g., Kawamoto, 1999). However, Kumagai-Matsuda (2001) notes that family consciousness differs among people younger than middle-aged.

Since participants in this research were undergraduates, the items for “respect for family” were presumed irrelevant. Therefore, three items for “respect for family” were excluded in this study. The final scale consisted of 14 items.

*Positive impressions of counseling.* To measure positive impressions of counseling, the Image of Counseling Center Scale was constructed by referring to the Images of Psychological Consultation Scales (Morita, 1990). The new scale was composed of 26 items, rated on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = absolutely disagree, and where 0 = cannot evaluate.

*Subjective norms of family and friends.* To measure subjective norms of family and friends, four items from the Subjective Norm Scale (Ito, 1997) were used. The scale consists of two subscales: “normative belief” (“If you were in the present situation, how much would your family/friends think you should seek professional psychological help?”) and “motivation to comply” (“Do you generally prefer to uphold your family’s /friends’ expectations?”) These items are rated on a 6-point scale from 1 = not at all to 6 = very much.

## Results

### **Structure of scales**

Factor analyses, employing common factor models with orthogonal rotations, were completed for each scale. Items loading under 3.5 were excluded. Additionally, internal consistency reliabilities for each scale were calculated using Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  procedure.

*Help-seeking intention.* Factor analysis yielded two factors, which were named “help needs” (six items,  $\alpha = .832$ ) and “seeking help without hesitation” (two items,

$r = .792$ ), similar to previous research.

*Concern for Sekentei.* Factor analysis yielded one factor; two items were excluded based on the criteria described above. The mean scores were used in the subsequent analysis ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .617$ ). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was sufficiently high at  $\alpha = .850$ .

*Positive impressions of counseling.* Factor analysis yielded two factors, which were named “positive impressions” (11 items,  $\alpha = .881$ ) and “negative impressions” (10 items,  $\alpha = .830$ ). Based on the criteria, five items were excluded. In this study, only “positive impressions” was used in subsequent analysis ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = .740$ ).

*Subjective norms of family and friends.* The family/friends scores were computed by multiplying the normative belief and motivation scores in accordance with Ajzen & Fishbein (1980). The mean scores for family ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = 7.90$ ) and friends ( $M = -.12$ ,  $SD = 7.68$ ) were used in the subsequent analysis.

### **Relations between the variables**

*Correlations between the variables.* Correlation analysis (Table 1) showed significant positive correlations between “help needs” and “seeking help without hesitation” ( $r = .560$ ,  $p < .001$ ), “positive impression of counseling” ( $r = .372$ ,  $p < .001$ ), “subjective norms of family” ( $r = .289$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and “subjective norms of friends” ( $r = .268$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, “seeking help without hesitation” was negatively correlated with “concern for *Sekentei*” ( $r = -.261$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Interaction effects on “help needs”.* A four-way ANOVA was conducted for “concern for *Sekentei*”, with the independent variables being “positive impression of counseling”, “subjective norms of family”, and “subjective norms of friends”, and the “help needs” score as the

Table 1. Correlations between variables

	help-seeking intention		<i>Sekentei</i>	positive impressions	subjective norms	
	help needs	hesitation			family	friends
help needs	-					
seeking help without hesitation	.560 ***	-				
concern for <i>Sekentei</i>	-.063	-.261 ***	-			
positive impressions	.372 ***	.116	.054	-		
subjective norms of family	.289 ***	.095	-.014	.122 *	-	
subjective norms of friends	.268 ***	.086	.029	.255 ***	.509 ***	-

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$   
*Sekentei* = concern for *Sekentei*, positive impressions = positive impressions of counseling

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the three-way interaction effect of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of friends” on “help needs”

<i>Sekentei</i>	positive impressions	subjective norms of friends					
		high			low		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
high	high	3.40	.781	44	3.02	.707	30
	low	2.44	.707	20	2.74	.629	35
low	high	3.33	.680	36	3.13	.560	33
	low	3.15	.728	32	2.67	.575	43

*Sekentei* = concern for *Sekentei*, positive impressions = positive impressions of counseling

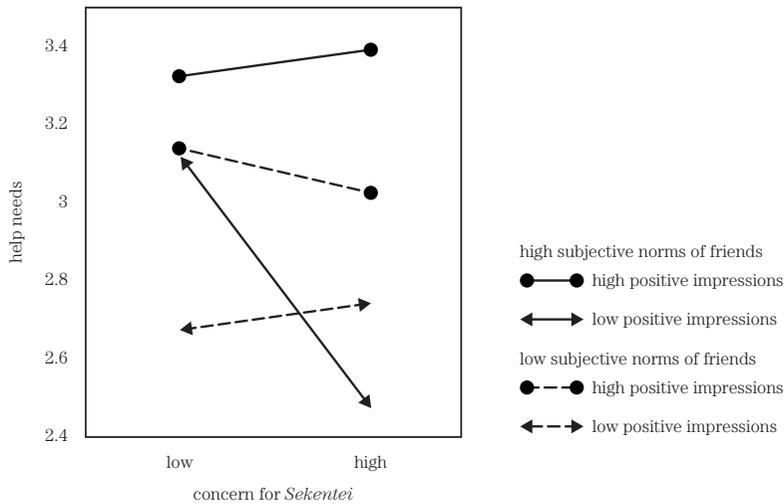


Figure 1. Three-way interaction of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of friends” on “help needs”

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the three-way interaction effect of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” on “help needs”

<i>Sekentei</i>	subjective norms of family	subjective norms of friends					
		high			low		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
high	high	3.31	.753	49	2.90	.641	25
	low	2.47	.909	15	2.85	.705	40
low	high	3.26	.633	52	3.03	.590	23
	low	3.18	.912	16	2.80	.611	53

*Sekentei* = concern for *Sekentei*

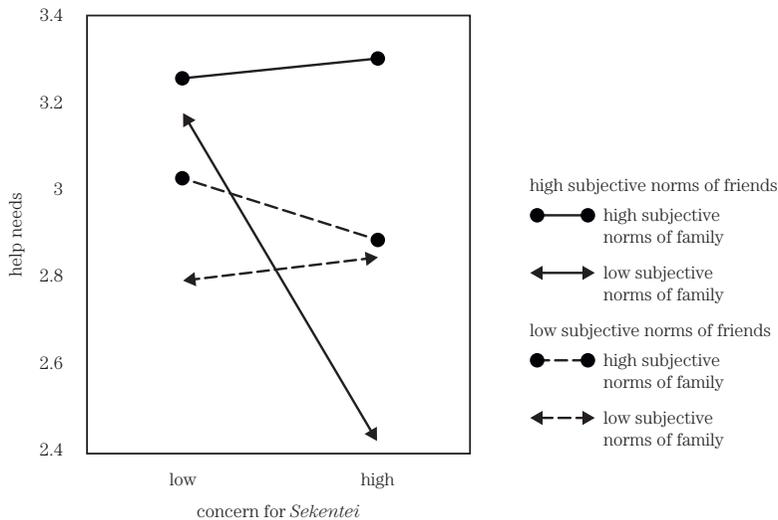


Figure 2. Three-way interaction of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” on “help needs”

dependent variable (Table 2). Subgroups of each factor were created by dividing scores into high/low groups based on medians. The main effects of “concern for *Sekentei*” ( $F_{(1,257)}=8.36, p<.01$ ), “positive impressions of counseling” ( $F_{(1,257)}=24.2, p<.001$ ), and “subjective norms of family” ( $F_{(1,257)}=7.09, p<.01$ ) were significant. Furthermore, the results showed a significant three-way interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of friends”

( $F_{(1,257)}=3.95, p<.05$ ; Figure 1). Further analyses showed that the simple interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” was significant for those scoring high on “subjective norms of friends” ( $F_{(1,257)}=5.76, p<.05$ ), but not for those scoring low ( $F_{(1,257)}=.168, n.s.$ ).

Additionally, the results showed a significant three-way interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” ( $F_{(1,257)}=5.36, p<.05$ ; Table 3,

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the three-way interaction effect of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” on “seeking help without hesitation”

<i>Sekentei</i>	subjective norms of family	subjective norms of friends					
		high			low		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
high	high	2.96	1.01	49	2.34	.771	25
	low	2.17	1.08	15	2.69	1.15	40
low	high	3.01	1.09	52	3.11	.908	23
	low	3.34	1.14	16	3.08	1.06	53

*Sekentei* = concern for *Sekentei*

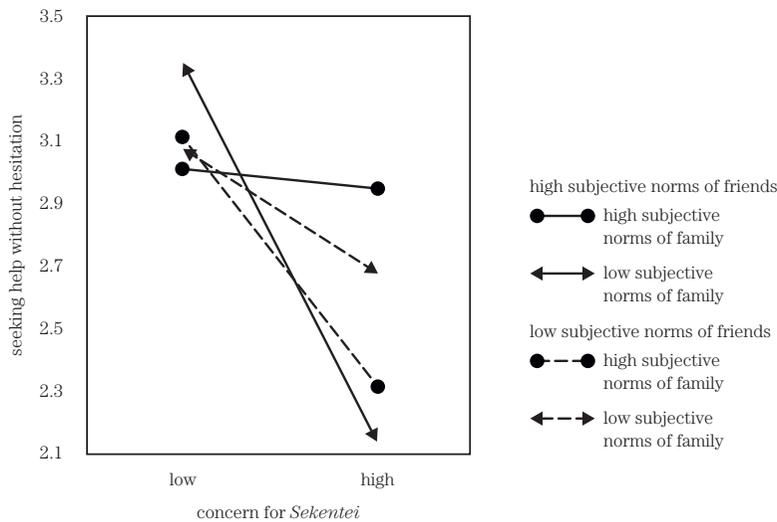


Figure 3. Three-way interaction of “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” on “seeking help without hesitation”

Figure 2). Further analyses showed that the simple interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” was significant for those scoring high on “subjective norms of friends” ( $F_{(1,257)}=7.29, p<.01$ ) but not for those scoring low ( $F_{(1,257)}=.331, n.s.$ ).

In addition to the three-way interaction effects, the two-way interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of friends” was also significant ( $F_{(1,257)}=5.15, p<.05$ ). A significant simple main effect of

“subjective norms of friends” was confirmed for those scoring low on “concern for *Sekentei*” ( $F_{(1,257)}=5.08, p<.05$ ) but not for those scoring high ( $F_{(1,257)}=.910, n.s.$ ).

*Interaction effects on “seeking help without hesitation”.* A four-way ANOVA with “seeking help without hesitation” as the dependent variable was conducted, revealing a significant main effect of “concern for *Sekentei*” only ( $F_{(1,257)}=17.9, p<.001$ ). In addition, the three-way interaction effect for “concern for

*Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” was significant ( $F_{(1,257)}=6.49, p<.05$ ; Table 4, Figure 3). Further analyses showed that the simple interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” was significant for those scoring high on “subjective norms of friends” ( $F_{(1,257)}=7.04, p<.01$ ) but not for those scoring low ( $F_{(1,257)}=.902, n.s.$ ).

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated the effects of *Sekentei* on seeking professional psychological help, and the moderating factors of the negative impacts. The results showed that “concern for *Sekentei*” had negative effects on seeking psychological help, although the effects can be moderated by “positive impressions of counseling” and “subjective norms of family and friends”.

### **Effects of concern for *Sekentei* on help-seeking intention**

A four-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect of “concern for *Sekentei*” on both “help needs” and “seeking help without hesitation”. Supporting our first hypothesis, the results indicated that high concern for *Sekentei* significantly decreases help-seeking intention. Since people with high *Sekentei* are highly sensitive to shame (Kato, 1990), *Sekentei* may provoke worry about discrimination or social stigma, which is said to be one of the most significant barriers to psychological services (Sibicky & Dovidio, 1986; Stefl & Prosperi, 1985). If individuals are sensitive to observations and evaluations of others, the fear of being judged negatively or stigmatized can be easily invoked. As a result, people may refrain from seeking psychological help.

### **Moderating effects of positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms on help needs**

A four-way ANOVA with “help needs” as the dependent variable showed significant main effects of “concern for *Sekentei*”, “positive impressions of counseling”, and “subjective norms of family”. Besides the connection between *Sekentei* and help-seeking intention as mentioned previously, positive impressions and subjective norms of family also influenced help-seeking intention, corresponding with TRA. It is assumed that “positive impressions of counseling” had a positive effect on “help needs”, because a positive attitude toward something leads to positive behavior with respect to that thing (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Additionally, subjective norms of family would appear important given that parents are the first teachers to develop their children’s norms and values (Erikson, 1968), and remain the primary source of advice and financial assistance for young adults (Fingerman et al., 2009).

By contrast, “subjective norms of friends” did not show a significant main effect, while it had a moderating effect on impact of *Sekentei*. A four-way ANOVA showed a significant three-way interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of friends” (Figure 1), supporting our second hypothesis. This result demonstrated that family and friends have different effects on help-seeking. Although friends are the closest others after family members, friends operate as part of social groups, which function as public eyes or judges for the individual. Therefore, norms of friends may influence the concern of being judged negatively by others, rather than help-seeking intention itself. The results seen in Figure 1 indicate that participants with high “concern for

*Sekentei*” maintained “help needs” at a high level only when both “positive impressions” and “subjective norms of friends” are high. In other words, people still can have high help needs regardless of concern for *Sekentei*, if they have positive impressions of counseling and favorable subjective norms of friends.

A four-way ANOVA of “help needs” also showed a significant three-way interaction effect for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” (Figure 2). The results indicated those with high subjective norms of family and subjective norms of friends had high help needs even when concern for *Sekentei* was high. Similarly, Latimer & Ginis (2005) showed that subjective norms had a significant impact, especially on people who are concerned with what others think of them. This implies that if individuals are highly concerned with *Sekentei*, they are sensitive to the observations and evaluations of others, and hence, will respect and adopt the opinions of others. Therefore, if family and friends approve of seeking psychological help, people with high *Sekentei* would still recognize the need for help.

***Moderating effects of positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms on seeking help without hesitation***

A three-way ANOVA with “seeking help without hesitation” as the dependent variable showed a significant main effect of “concern for *Sekentei*”, as already described. In contrast, main effects of “positive impressions of counseling” and “subjective norms of family and friends” were not significant. In addition, the three-way interaction for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “positive impressions of counseling” × “subjective norms of family and friends”

was not significant. This failure to predict “seeking help without hesitation” may be due to its conceptual features. Tamura & Ishikuma (2001) indicate that “seeking help without hesitation” relates to personal traits, since it represents an individual’s resistance and negative cognitive tendency toward seeking help. Moreover, it is said that behaviors that relate to personal traits are not predicted very strongly by TRA (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It is possible that for these reasons, “positive impressions” and “subjective norms” did not effectively predict “seeking help without hesitation”.

On the other hand, the three-way interaction for “concern for *Sekentei*” × “subjective norms of family” × “subjective norms of friends” showed a significant effect on “seeking help without hesitation” (see Figure 3). As mentioned above, the norms of significant others are especially important for those concerned about their social image. Additionally, people will have a stronger intention to perform a behavior along with the perceived importance of the others (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Thus, a person with high concern for *Sekentei* will not hesitate to seek help if family and friends approve and encourage seeking help.

***Suggestions for interventions in promoting help-seeking intention***

The results of this study indicate that positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms of family and friends moderate the negative effects of *Sekentei* and promote help-seeking intention. In clinical settings, cases typifying our findings are common. For example, a college student who avoided counseling because of how he might look in the eyes of others finally gave in and sought help after a professor approached his mother to encourage him

to do so (Kudou, 2009). In another case, a middle-aged woman with a positive image of counseling was encouraged to seek psychological services when her friend approved of the idea, despite the fear of being judged negatively by her husband (Sakaki, 2008). These cases demonstrate the importance of positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms for people with high *Sekentei* concern. In fact, Shiraishi & Tatsuki (1995) reviewed a number of clinical cases and indicated that both individuals' attitudes toward counseling and support from significant others were essential for not only starting counseling, but also attaining successful outcomes.

We hypothesize that there are several ways to facilitate each of these moderating factors. Positive impressions, measured as attitudes in this study, may be promoted through advertisements or public relations activities that reflect psychological services positively. In fact, Ajzen & Fishbein (1980) showed that a person's attitude was changed by persuasive appeals regardless of the previous attitude. On the other hand, with respect to subjective norms, which refers to an individual's "perception" of others' preferences toward a behavior, we note that these do not always reflect what others actually think. Therefore, while promoting family and friends' preferences regarding counseling is important, simply observing significant others committing to psychological services may be effective by itself. Thus, holding mental health or psycho-educational workshops that target families or classes may be one way to promote subjective norms. These are practical suggestions of strategies for counselors to use when approaching people who have a fear of seeking help due to *Sekentei* concern.

### ***Limitations and further prospect***

Although the present research revealed important findings, there are some limitations. First, the items for "respect of family" were excluded from the *Sekentei* scale because of their irrelevance to the participants in this study. However, this is a crucial factor of *Sekentei*, especially in Japanese culture, where an individuals' shame is also the family's shame. Thus, it is necessary to keep this in mind when interpreting the findings.

Second, the participants were non-clinical undergraduates, and help-seeking intention was measured under the *assumption* that participants were in a depressive state. In order to examine general tendencies, a quantitative study was designed involving a large number of participants. However, the situation may be different in actuality, or it may have differed if a clinical population was studied. Therefore, care needs to be exercised in interpreting the findings. Further research with clinical participants or a larger number of participants is needed for a more precise look at the matter.

Third, although practical suggestions were derived from our findings, few empirical studies that substantiate the utility of TRA in promoting help-seeking have been conducted (e.g., Demyan & Anderson, 2012). Therefore, further research, such as through longitudinal methods, is necessary to suggest effective interventions in actual clinical practices.

To summarize, concern for *Sekentei* has negative effects on help-seeking intention, but those effects can be moderated by positive impressions of counseling and subjective norms of family and friends. It was discovered that a person who has high concern for *Sekentei* tends to feel aversion toward seeking psychological help. However, if the person has positive

impressions of counseling and favorable subjective norms of significant others, s/he will feel no resistance toward seeking help. Several interventions for people with psychological barriers to seeking help were suggested from the findings. It is important for counselors to recognize and understand barriers and facilitators of help-seeking behavior and implement suggestions to promote the use of psychological services.

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