

# THE STIGMA OF SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS: SOME POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR A RECALCITRANT PROBLEM

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Despite recent advances in the treatment of individuals with severe mental illness (SMI), their full integration into society is hindered by lingering negative attitudes towards them. In this paper, a brief overview is provided on stigmatization towards individuals with SMI, including its' impact on quality of life and self-esteem, as well as the factors which likely underlie it. Research is reviewed showing that lowered negative perceptions towards persons with SMI are associated with previous contact with this population and with presentation of empirically-based information on the association between violence and SMI. Limitations of these findings are discussed with an eye towards developing improved techniques for reducing stigma.

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It is clear that persons with severe mental illnesses (SMI) such as schizophrenia are stigmatized by the general population. Reviews of the literature and recent empirical findings indicate that persons with SMI are viewed negatively by the public (1-6). These negative feelings are generally in excess of those toward people with a physical illness (7), although they may not be greater than those toward people with substance use disorders (see 1,8, for somewhat conflictual findings with different methodologies). In-

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terestingly, the negativity toward persons with SMI is not limited to members of the community but can also be found among mental health professionals (reviewed in 9). The nature of these negative feelings tends to be primarily fear, rather than dislike, neglect, or anger, as evidenced by surveys indicating that many individuals view people with SMI as dangerous and unpredictable (for discussions, see 5, 10-11).

The stigma of SMI has a number of adverse consequences. Specifically, stigmatization is generally associated with decreased employment and housing opportunities (12-14), increased family stress (15), and conflictual feelings (from the public) regarding acceptance into the community (16). Furthermore, the person with SMI may internalize stigma reactions resulting in depression (17), increased anxiety and decrements in social performance (18), lower self-esteem (19), and the adoption of secrecy and withdrawal as coping strategies (20). Although the internalization of stigma is not unique to persons with SMI (see 21), it may be as potentially damaging as the direct effects of stigma on employment and social relations. Therefore, the stigma of SMI likely interferes with the ability of persons with SMI to re-integrate into the community and may, by increasing ambient psychosocial stress, increase the likelihood of future relapse.

Given the pernicious effects of stigma on the lives of persons with SMI, it is imperative that mental health researchers and clinicians discover ways to reduce and ultimately, eliminate, stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors. A likely first step is to identify factors which contribute to stigma. In the ensuing section, factors associated with stigma (either in a causal or correlational manner) are briefly reviewed.

### **FACTORS UNDERLYING STIGMA TOWARDS PERSONS WITH SMI**

Stigma is a multifaceted construct which involves attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. As such, numerous factors likely contribute to its manifestation. These factors include having a label of mental illness, the social skill deficits and appearance of persons with SMI, lack of contact with individuals who have a mental illness,

and the perception of individuals with SMI as being extremely dangerous.

Labeling theory has its roots in the early work of Scheff (22,23), who originally posited that societal reactions have a strong etiological role in mental illness (24). Such a formulation has been disputed, with critics arguing that societal attitudes are not overly negative, that behaviors rather than labels cause rejection, and that persons with mental illness experience only temporary stigmatization from others (e.g., 25-27; for reviews and discussion, see 8, 24). Many of these criticisms have been refuted, as revealed by findings indicating that labels, even in the absence of aberrant behavior, can contribute to stigma (e.g., 28; reviewed by 24), and that public attitudes toward persons with mental illness are indeed not positive (5). Link and colleagues have provided evidence for a "modified labeling theory," which emphasizes the *consequences* of having a psychiatric label rather than its potential causal role in mental illness (20, 24). Thus, although a psychiatric label doesn't cause mental illness, it is certainly associated with a myriad of negative outcomes, which in turn may exacerbate and/or prolong the individual's psychiatric condition.

In addition to the deleterious effects of possessing a psychiatric label, individuals with SMI may be stigmatized because of illness-related behaviors and social skill deficits. Many of the symptoms associated with SMI, such as affect dysregulation, bizarre behavior, responding to internal stimuli, and language irregularities, likely scare or intimidate members of the non-psychiatric community. Support for this assertion is found in research showing that behaviors associated with mental illness in general (e.g., anxiety; tension), tend to produce negative reactions in excess of those associated with labeling effects (24, 29). In a recent study relevant to SMI, subjects read a description of a hypothetical individual whose schizophrenia was described either in terms of a label, symptoms, or a combination of both (30). The findings revealed that subjects who received the "symptom condition," either alone or in combination with the label of schizophrenia, rated the target person as less skilled (e.g., "is unable to maintain a job") relative to subjects in the "label-only" condition. Thus, the presence of psychiatric symptoms likely activated negative stereo-

types which influenced subjects' perceptions of a person with SMI.

The behaviors which contribute to stigma are not limited to those typically associated with active symptomatology. Specifically, individuals with SMI, relative to both clinical and non-clinical control subjects, show persistent and prominent deficits in social skills (31-33). These deficits (e.g., speech dysfluencies, poor eye contact, difficulty staying on topic) potentially contribute to negative interpersonal encounters, which may be aversive to members of the non-psychiatric public. Interestingly, social skills are also associated with perceptions of physical attractiveness among persons with SMI (34). Since physically attractive persons are perceived more favorably (i.e., in terms of abilities, competencies, personality, etc) and receive greater preferential treatment from others relative to physically unattractive persons, (35-37), it stands to reason that social skill deficits may *increase* stigma by contributing to perceptions of persons with SMI as being unattractive and undesirable.

There is growing evidence that contact with persons with mental illness may impact negative perceptions. In particular, self-reported previous contact with persons with mental illness is associated with more favorable attitudes (38,39) and lower ratings of perceived dangerousness toward persons with SMI (30,40). The effect of contact may be strongest for perceptions of males rather than females with SMI (41), a finding likely a result of the generally positive attitudes the public hold toward women with mental illness (18). The precise mechanisms underlying the contact effect are unclear, although it may increase individuals' knowledge base concerning SMI, a factor also associated with reduced stigma (2,42,43). Additional factors may also mediate the relationship between contact and stigma. As reviewed by Corrigan and Penn (9), these include frequent contact with persons who only moderately disconfirm the stereotype and/or are typical to the majority group in all dimensions other than the one associated with stigma, institutional support for contact, and cooperative interaction and equal status between the stigmatized individuals and members of the community. One of the challenges to future research is to determine how contact reduces stigma; in other words, the conditions under which contact may

or may not impact stigma. In this regard, mental health professionals may look toward their colleagues in social psychology for insights into these issues (9).

A final factor which contributes to stigma is perceived dangerousness. Empirical findings and reviews of the literature indicate that, in general, the public view persons with SMI as extremely dangerous (44). These perceptions appear to play a prominent role in the community's reactions toward persons with SMI. For example, Angermeyer and Matschinger (45) reported that attitudes toward mental illness became more negative following two assassination attempts against prominent politicians in Germany by persons with schizophrenia. In a more direct test of the role of perceived dangerousness on stigma, Link et al. (24) found that subjects scoring high on a perceptions of dangerousness scale, relative to those scoring low on the scale, were more likely to reject a hypothetical individual described as having been previously hospitalized in a "mental hospital." These findings led Link et al. to conclude: ". . . these results suggest that characteristics of respondents, in this case, their beliefs about the dangerousness of the mentally ill, affect how they react to a labeled person above and beyond that person's described behavior" (p. 1486). Thus, perceptions of dangerousness appear to be a critical factor in contributing to psychiatric stigma.

One could certainly argue that the public's perceptions are reasonable given evidence that, in general, persons with SMI are more prone to violence compared to members of the general population (for reviews and discussion, see 46-53). However, as discussed previously (41), reviews of the literature indicate that the risk of violent behavior among persons with SMI is modest relative to the risk associated with age, gender, violence history, socioeconomic status, and educational level (5,54). It should also be noted that the violence rates of persons with SMI are generally lower than for individuals with substance use disorders (49,55), a group which makes up a larger percentage of the population than those with SMI. Furthermore, the risk of violence among persons with SMI is not a fixed figure. Rather, it depends on factors such as dual-diagnosis (56,57), the presence of acute symptomatology (i.e., delusions involving loss of control, perceived threat, and paranoia) (10,58-60), and social context (e.g.,

46). Therefore, the picture that emerges is one of a public whose fears of persons with SMI are excessive and not in line with empirically-based evidence on the association between mental illness and violent behavior.

Since public perceptions of violence in SMI are excessive and perceived dangerousness contributes to stigma, one would expect that addressing public fears should reduce stigma. Based on this logic, a study was designed to directly address concerns regarding violence and mental illness. This study is described in the following section.

### **DISPELLING THE STIGMA OF SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

Changing public attitudes toward persons with SMI dates to work by Cumming and Cumming (61), and has been met with mixed success (62-66). However, only two studies, to our knowledge, directly addressed the issue of violence and severe mental illness (67,68). In the first study (67), a brief message stating that the majority of persons with mental illness are not violent, was presented prior to and following a made-for-TV film. The film portrayed a psychiatric patient who, while out on a day pass, murdered his wife. The findings revealed that the brief message did not impact subjects' attitudes toward mental illness. Although Wahl and Lefkowitz (67) concluded that providing "compensatory information" may be limited in reducing stigma, they also noted that the film may have been too emotionally arousing to be overcome by a brief message. In a second study (68), the negative effects (on attitudes) of a newspaper article which described a violent crime committed by a person with mental illness was effectively offset by two types of factual information; one addressed misconceptions about mental illness, including the infrequency of violent behavior among persons with mental illness, and the other underscored the role of media distortion on impacting community attitudes toward persons with mental illness. These findings suggest that factual information may be effective in nullifying the influence of negative news coverage of persons with mental illness, at least as promulgated by the print-media.

A recent study by Penn et al. (41) extended upon Thornton and Wahl's findings by investigating the effects of factual information (i.e., empirically-based), previous contact with persons with SMI, and target gender, on perceptions of dangerousness toward both a specific target person with SMI and persons with SMI in general. The subjects in Penn et al., were 182 undergraduate students from a midwestern university. To address the role of information on perceptions of dangerousness, subjects were randomly assigned to one of four information conditions. These were entitled "no information," "general information," "acute information," and "comparative information" conditions. The no information condition merely instructed subjects that they were about to read a description of a man(woman) with schizophrenia (described below). The general information condition comprised a general description of the symptoms and course of schizophrenia (based on the DSM-IV). The acute and comparative information conditions both began with information contained in the general information condition. The acute information condition then summarized the association between the presence of psychotic symptoms and violent behavior in psychiatric patients. Finally, the comparative information condition compared the prevalence rates of violent behavior across psychiatric disorders. Prevalence rate data were based on the Epidemiologic Catchment Area Surveys which showed that persons with SMI had lower violence rates than individuals with substance use disorders (49).

All information conditions were administered prior to a vignette describing either a male or female target with schizophrenia. A variation of this vignette has been used in previous research (24,30). Following presentation of the vignette, subjects completed two measures of perceived dangerousness: One measure evaluated subject perceptions regarding the dangerousness of persons with SMI in general ("Danger-G"), while the other measure evaluated subject perceptions regarding the dangerousness of the target individual ("Danger-I"). Subjects were also classified into those with and without previous contact with persons with mental illness. However, since the findings regarding previous contact and target gender were reported earlier in this ar-

ticle, and these variables didn't interact with the Information variable, they won't be repeated here.

Analyses revealed a main effect of Information condition only for dangerousness perceptions of persons with mental illness in general (i.e., Danger-G). Post-hoc tests showed that the "comparative information" condition was associated with lower ratings of dangerousness relative to the other groups. When a more stringent post-hoc test was used (i.e., one that controlled for conducting multiple statistical tests), only the "acute" and "comparative" information conditions significantly differed from one another. For perceptions of the target individual, the effect of the Information condition was not significant, although the group means were in the hypothesized direction.

These findings suggest that providing specific information on the relationship between violence and mental illness may impact individuals' fears about persons with schizophrenia in general. However, there were clearly limits to this effect, as perceptions of the target individual were not affected. Furthermore, the data indicate that some information may have a deleterious effect on perceptions of dangerousness; providing information on the role of acute symptoms in initiating violent behavior appeared to *increase* subject fears (i.e., as presented in the "acute information" condition). Thus, we concluded that efforts to reduce stigmatization via information packages may not benefit from focusing on psychotic symptoms.

Although the findings from Penn et al. are promising, a number of limitations should be considered so as to place the results in a proper context. First, the study was conducted with undergraduate students, a group with less crystallized attitudes than older adults (69). However, affecting the attitudes of college-age persons may be an important step in changing their behaviors toward persons with SMI after they leave school. Second, the study conclusions are limited to impacting perceptions of dangerousness; generalization of the findings to affecting discriminatory behaviors was not evaluated. Finally, the "comparative information" condition did not address the issue of dual-diagnosis. As individuals with schizophrenia are at high risk for substance use disorders (70), it is possible that including information on risk for dual-diagnosis may have eliminated or reduced the observed



Information effect. Although this is an empirical question, it should be noted that if substance use comorbidity is included in information packages, then, as noted by Penn et al., (41), such information should also state that: Substance use disorders co-occur at a high rate with other psychiatric disorders; substance use raises the risk of violent behavior for *all* psychiatric conditions; and over 50% of persons with SMI have never met criteria for a substance use disorder. Thus, any comprehensive information package attempting to reduce stigma should present a complete picture regarding comorbidity issues, not just those relevant to SMI.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have reviewed research indicating that negative attitudes toward persons with SMI can be reduced. The most promising methods for impacting psychiatric stigma are promoting contact between the community and persons with SMI, and information which directly addresses issues of violence and other misconceptions concerning mental illness. However, as noted in the foregoing, there are still unanswered questions regarding not only *how* these factors impact stigma, but also the extent to which changes in the laboratory translate into real changes in the lives of persons with SMI. Until that issue can be addressed, the findings summarized here provide hope, but clearly not an answer, for reducing psychiatric stigma.

As mental health professionals, we must not only redouble our efforts to reduce psychiatric stigma for our clients, but we must do so in a responsible and ethical manner. Clearly, blanket statements such as "persons with SMI are no more likely to be violent than members of the general community," and "labels alone cause stigma," are unethical, misleading, and not supported by empirical findings. In this regard, one has to question the use of "politically-correct" labels, such as "consumer," "client," "customer" and even "severe mental illness" in identifying individuals whose psychiatric symptoms are often characterized by psychosis and who may be dependent on the mental health system. This type of reality is likely not well represented by vague, innocuous la-

bels, some of which are not even preferred by persons with a psychiatric disorder (71). Of course, this is an empirical question which we are currently addressing in our laboratory. Until answers to these questions are obtained, however, the process of stigma reduction should not be one of "they are no different than we are," but rather, that of acceptance into the community, differences and all.

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