Focus on Creative Inquiry   Research and Innovation Month

2014

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Implicit and Explicit Stigma Towards Mental Health Treatment

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Abstract

In order to better understand the stigma associated with mental health treatment, 118 Clemson University students completed Implicit Association Tasks (IAT) and self-report surveys. The IAT is a computer-based reaction time task where participants respond to terms for medical and psychological treatments or patients that are paired with attributes such as good vs. bad, effective vs. ineffective, and honoring vs. humiliating. The IAT examined whether individuals are more likely to associate psychological treatment and patients with more negative attributes compared to medical treatment and patients. Survey items assessed attitudes towards mental health and medical treatment, as well as mental health and medical patients. The IAT results revealed a significant negative implicit bias toward mental health treatment and mental health patients. Explicit survey measures also showed more negative responses toward mental health treatment and patients. Some correspondence was also obtained between the implicit biases reflected by the IAT and the explicit biases shown on the self-report survey. Through better understanding these biases, researchers can work to reduce the stigma associated with mental health treatment.

Introduction

- Mental illness is known to carry negative stigma in society as bad, helpless, and blameworthy, while physical illness is generally more accepted (Teachman et al., 2006).
- Prior research demonstrates implicit negative attitudes and beliefs about the helplessness and blameworthiness of mentally ill persons. In addition, people have relatively negative explicit attitudes and biases about the helplessness (though not blameworthiness) of mentally ill persons (Teachman et al., 2006).
- In the present study, we sought to look more closely at implicit and explicit attitudes towards mental health patients and treatment through comparing differences in responses regarding mental health patients versus medical patients and mental health treatment versus medical treatment using both implicit and explicit measures.
- This study seeks to determine if there is a greater negative bias towards mental health patients and treatment than there is towards medical patients and treatment.

Method

- *Participants*: 118 Clemson undergraduates (65% female, 35% male; 66% freshman, 34% sophomore to senior)

- *Procedure*:
  - All participants completed a self-report survey measuring explicit bias. The survey contained 5 semantic differential scales where participants rated the displayed adjectives describing those seeking treatment (strong/weak, positive/negative, good/ bad, honoring/humiliating, competent/helpless) on a 1 to 7. scale, and four semantic differential scales for treatment (effective/ineffective, positive/negative, good/bad, helpful/useless).

  - Each participant completed 2 randomly assigned Implicit Association Tasks out of a possible 5.

  - Three IATs measured implicit bias towards those seeking mental health treatment through pairing words (i.e. strong/weak, competent/helpless, honoring/humiliating) with either medical or mental health treatment, and measuring the difference in response time. Two IATs measured implicit bias towards mental health treatment through pairing words (i.e. good/bad, effective/ineffective) with either medical or mental health treatment, and measuring the difference in response time.

Results

- All IATs showed a significant implicit negative bias towards both mental health patients and mental health treatment (see Table 1).
- All semantic differentials showed a significant explicit negative bias towards mental health treatment (see Table 2).
- Most semantic differentials showed a significant explicit negative bias towards mental health patients (see Table 2)
- Some correlations were obtained between the implicit and explicit measures of attitudes toward mental health treatment and treatment seekers. However, these correlations were sporadic and did not reflect correspondence with specific attributes.

Table 1: Implicit Measures

Patient IATs	t	Df
Strong/Weak	2.224*	33
Competent/Helpless	2.972**	31
Honoring/Humiliating	3.519**	37
Treatment IATs	**t**	**Df**
Good/Bad	3.596**	51
Effective/Ineffective	4.298**	44

*p < .05, **p < .01; difference is significantly different from 0

Table 2: Explicit Measures

Patient Semantic Differentials	t	df
Weak/Strong	1.566	112
Positive/Negative	2.713**	111
Good/Bad	3.022**	113
Humiliating/Honoring	3.691**	112
Competent Helpless	3.454**	112
Treatment Semantic Differentials	**t**	**df**
Effective/Ineffective	-7.272**	112
Positive/Negative	-3.839**	111
Good/Bad	-5.304**	112
Helpful/Useless	-6.109**	112

*p < .05, **p < .01; difference is significantly different from 0

Discussion

- The findings demonstrate both implicit and explicit negative evaluations of mental health patients and treatment.
- Mental health patients are more likely to be seen as weak, helpless, and humiliating compared to patients seeking medical treatment.
- Mental health treatment is more likely to be seen as bad and ineffective compared to medical treatment.
- Efforts should be made to reduce the stigma related to mental health patients and treatment.
- Interventions should seek to shift perceptions of mental health patients to being strong, competent, and honorable, and mental health treatment as good and effective.
- Consistent with prior research (Teachman et al., 2006), explicit and implicit measures of attitudes were largely unrelated.

References

Teachman, B. A., Wilson, J. G., & Komarovskaya, I. (2006). Implicit and explicit stigma of mental illness in diagnosed and healthy samples. *Journal of Social And Clinical Psychology, 25*(1), 75-95. doi:10.1521/jscp.2006.25.1.75