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Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Towards Mental Health Treatment

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Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Toward Mental Health Treatment

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Abstract

The present study assessed implicit and explicit attitudes toward mental health treatment, and whether the different attitude assessments were related to treatment seeking. Undergraduate students ($N=192$) completed three Implicit Association Tests (IAT), which were computer-based reaction time tasks where participants responded to terms for mental health and medical treatments that were paired with the attributes good versus bad, effective versus ineffective, and honoring versus humiliating. Survey items assessed explicit ratings of mental health treatment and medical treatment on these attributes, as well as more general attitudes toward mental health treatment. The IAT results revealed a significant negative implicit bias toward mental health treatment as being less effective, good, and honoring than medical treatment. Explicit survey measures also showed more negative responses toward mental health treatment. Some correspondence was also obtained between the implicit biases reflected by the IAT and the explicit biases shown on the self-report survey. Finally, students who had sought mental health treatment had more negative explicit attitudes toward mental health treatment than those who had not sought treatment, but no differences were obtained on the implicit attitude measures.

Introduction

- Mental health treatment is not utilized due to fear of stigmatization, and negative attitudes toward treatment (Kim et al., 2011; Mojtabai, 2007).
- In the present study, we examined implicit and explicit attitudes toward mental health treatment through comparing differences in responses regarding mental health treatment versus medical treatment using both implicit and explicit measures, and examined if these attitudes were related to treatment seeking.
- Implicit attitudes lie outside of conscious awareness, and may present different responses than explicit ratings (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rusch et al., 2009)
- Prior research demonstrated implicit negative attitudes and beliefs about the helplessness and blameworthiness of mentally ill persons. In addition, results showed negative explicit attitudes and biases regarding the helplessness (though not blameworthiness) of mentally ill persons (Teachman et al., 2006).
- Purpose of current study: To determine if there is an implicit and explicit negative bias toward mental health treatment, and if such negative biases are related to treatment seeking behaviors.

Method

- Participants:** 192 Clemson undergraduates (68% female, 32% male; 63% freshman, 37% sophomore to senior)
- Procedure:** Participants completed a counter-balanced series of a self-report survey and 3 IATs under controlled conditions.
- Materials:**
- Self-report survey measuring explicit bias. 3 *semantic differential* scales displayed adjectives describing mental health treatment (good-bad, effective-ineffective, honoring-humiliating) on a 1 to 7 scale.
- Self-report attitude measures. 5 items for *positive attitudes* and 6 items for *negative attitudes* on a 1-5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. (Kim et al., 2011)
- IATs measuring implicit bias. 3 computerized IATs measuring response times to pairings of medical and mental health treatment with adjectives of good-bad, effective-ineffective, honoring-humiliating (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Meade, 2009).
- Control variables. Depression (Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 1999), Anxiety (Spielberger, 1983), and Functional Impairment (Sheehan, Harnett-Sheehan, Raj, 1996).
- Treatment seeking. Participants indicated if they had received mental health services for a stress, emotional, alcohol, or family problem in the past 12 months.

Results

- All IATs showed a significant implicit negative bias toward mental health treatment (see Figure 1).
- All semantic differentials showed a significant explicit negative bias toward mental health treatment (see Figure 1).
- Some correlations were obtained between the implicit and explicit measures of attitudes toward mental health treatment (see Table 1).
- Negative attitudes was a significant predictor to having received mental health treatment in the past 12 months (See Table 2).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. IAT Good	--						
2. IAT Effective	.25**	--					
3. IAT Honoring	.19*	.13	--				
4. SD Good	-.22**	-.15*	-.17*	--			
5. SD Effective	-.16*	-.18*	.22**	.47**	--		
6. SD Honoring	-.13*	-.03	-.07	.41**	.26**	--	
7. Positive Attitudes	-.04	-.01	-.01	.17*	.22**	.14	--
8. Negative Attitudes	-.05	-.01	.01	-.01	-.12	-.12	-.54**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. N range = 182-192.

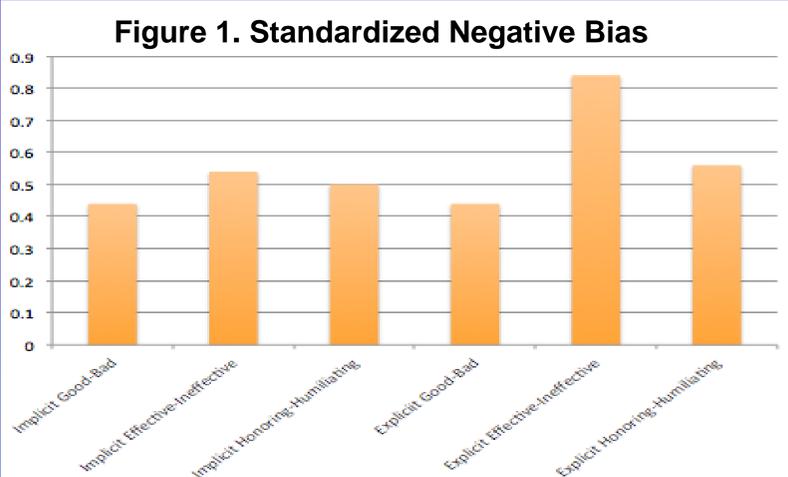


Figure 2. IAT Example Screenshot

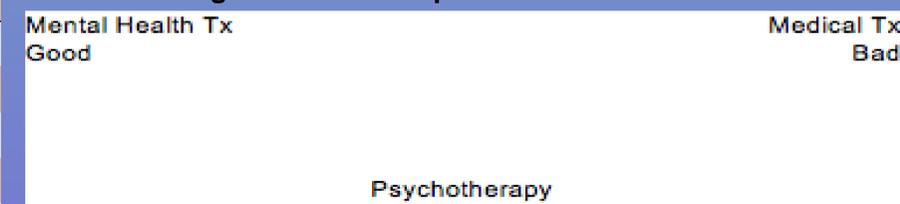


Table 2. Implicit and Explicit Correlates of Treatment Seeking

	B	SE	Wald	OR	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
<i>Step 1</i>						
Gender	.37	.47	.61	1.44	.57	3.63
Anxiety symptoms	-.74	.59	1.54	.48	.15	1.53
Depression symptoms	.42	.61	.46	1.51	.46	5.03
Functional impairment	.44	.30	2.19	1.56	.87	2.81
<i>Step 2</i>						
IAT Good	.39	.81	.23	1.48	.30	
IAT Effective	.27	.78	.12	1.31	.29	
IAT Honoring	-.51	.70	.53	.60	.15	
Negative attitudes	-1.24**	.38	10.83	.29	.14	.61
Positive attitudes	.62	.42	2.16	1.86	.81	4.24
SD Effective	.40*	.20	3.92	1.49	1.00	2.21
SD Good	.30	.18	2.78	1.35	.95	1.91
SD Honoring	.35*	.18	3.92	1.42	1.00	2.00

Discussion

- This is the first study to demonstrate both implicit and explicit negative attitudes toward mental health treatment.
- Mental health treatment was more likely to be seen as less good, less effective, and less honoring in comparison to medical treatment.
- Explicit items should mirror the presentation of the IAT in order to examine connections between the different measures.
- Those who sought treatment in the last 12 months had less explicit negative attitudes. It may take longer for implicit attitudes to change.
- Efforts should be made to reduce the stigma related to mental health treatment in order to help increase treatment seeking behaviors.
- Interventions should seek to shift perceptions of mental health treatment as good, effective, and honoring.

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