Students' Attitudes towards Mental Illness: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The number of people with a mental illness continues to increase greatly, yet it remains one of the most stigmatized illnesses in the U.S. The stigma held about mental illness can affect the way individuals with the illness are treated in society. This heightens the need for greater understanding of the prevailing attitudes, as a basis for squelching negative ones. This is especially critical on college campuses where the rate of mental illness is particularly striking. This study adds to the literature by examining attitudes towards mental illness among college students. Given that attitudes may vary by areas of study, the study compares social work and non-social work students' attitudes about mental illness. Social work students are responsible for addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, including those with a mental illness. Comparing their attitudes with those of other students could gauge the adequacy of the education that social work students are receiving on mental illness. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected on a convenience sample of 90 students using a twenty-item survey. Forty-six percent of the participants were social workers and fifty-four percent represented other majors. Results from the study support the hypothesis that social work students have more positive attitudes about mental illness than non-social work students. For example, using the Mann-Whitney test, the study found that social work students were less likely to agree that individuals with mental illness are a danger, unpredictable, and difficult to talk to. They were also most likely to disagree with the idea that people are generally sympathetic to those who suffer from a mental illness. This difference was statistically significant at the p≥.05 level. The study findings have implications for teaching content on mental illness across all majors.

Keywords: Mental illness, undergraduate students, social work

1. Introduction

1.1. Mental Illness

The number of people with a mental illness continues to increase greatly, yet it remains one of the most stigmatized illnesses in the U. S. The stigma held about mental illness can affect the way individuals with the illness are treated in society. 18.5% of Americans are known to have some type of mental illness in a given year (*National Alliance on Mental Illness*, 2018, para. 1)[1]. The percentage of individuals with a mental illness on college campus is also striking. For example approximately 52% of college students have a mental illness (*American Psychological Association*, 2018, para. 1)[2]. Mental illness, which pertains to having a mental disorder, is labeled as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome that can take place in an individual and is associated with present distress, disability, or with increased risk of suffering from death, pain, or loss of freedom (Stein et al., 2010)[3]. In addition, it is critical that the behavior does not evolve from an expectable response, but instead a sign or place of deviance (Stein et al, 2010). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, *Fifth Edition* (DSM-V) splits all mental disorders into 20 chapters overall, which houses every type of mental illness (Regier et al., 2013)[4].

These disorders, or types of mental illness, are looked at in a research study by Haslam and Giosan (2002)[5]. Within their research, they looked at DSM-IV disorders and whether formal education on mental illness affected whether the individuals were able to decipher between what is legitimately a type of mental illness and what is not (Haslam & Giosan, 2002). According to Haslam and Giosan (2002), the lay concepts of a mental disorder, as well as concepts brought on by those that are strictly educated on the DSM-IV and DSM-V, showed a sense of moderate concordance within their understanding of the term and idea. Therefore, while some individuals that were studied had no prior knowledge on the subject, they were still able to decipher the difference between what qualifies an individual to have a mental illness and what does not (Haslam & Giosan, 2002). In this research, we will examine whether or not social work students and non-social work students have differing attitudes towards individuals with mental illness.

2. Previous Research

2.1. Existing Studies

Existing studies on mental illness indicates that individuals with mental illness are being discriminated against due to a preconceived fear of dangerousness. This was most evident in studies conducted by Phelan and Basow (2007)[6] and Link and Cullen (1986)[7]. Link and Cullen (1986) looked at dangerousness when an individual is in contact with the mentally ill. Within this study, Link and Cullen (1986) used two general population samples, each of which added up to a random sample of about 300 residents within the community. Those who participated were asked to answer questions about contact with psychiatric patients, whether they had previous contact, and how they would feel if they had contact in the future (Link & Cullen, 1986). Their research found that if there was increased contact, there was a true association with reduced fear, which was unlike the preconceived fear that most individuals tend to inhabit (Link & Cullen, 1986). In addition, their research concluded with an explanation as to why there is reduced fear when one comes in contact with an individual with mental illness. This explanation stated "that perceptions of danger influence the extent to which individuals interact with the mentally ill" (Link & Cullen, 1986, p. 289). Therefore, based on the research by Link and Cullen (1986), there is reduced fear when associated with actual contact with an individual who is suffering from a mental illness.

Phelan and Basow (2007) conducted a study to look at how undergraduate students felt towards individuals who suffered from mental illness and perceptions of dangerousness. However, instead of finding a decreased sense of dangerousness, as in the study by Link and Cullen (1986), their research found that individuals who come into contact with the mentally ill actually could have increased fear (Phelan & Basow, 2007). Phelan and Basow (2007) conducted their study on 168 undergraduate students from a small liberal arts college, which included 96 females and 72 males. The participants read from three different scenarios, each of which described a different character suffering from a type of metal illness (Phelan & Basow, 2007). These included an alcohol problem, major depression, and common stress (Phelan & Basow, 2007). While looking at these differing scenarios, participants labeled their desire for social distance and perceived dangerousness of the subject (Phelan & Basow, 2007). However, the participants also had to look at whether or not mental illness is labeled due to stigma, which can include familiarity with mental illness, gender roles, empathy, and social dominance (Phelan & Basow, 2007).

While studying the results, it was revealed that participants labeled individuals who were mentally ill as being more dangerous (Phelan & Basow, 2007). In addition, when looking at perceived dangerousness, individuals who viewed the scenario that depicted a character with alcohol dependence or major depression first were more inclined to think about mental illness (Phelan & Basow, 2007). Therefore, the characters were more likely to be depicted as dangerous (Phelan & Basow, 2007). However, when looking at the common stress scenario and dangerousness, Phelan and Basow (2007) found that those who looked at common stress first were more likely to think of the characters as being dangerous, but also less likely to label the behavior as a mental illness. The characters that were more likely to be labeled as having a mental illness were the character with major depression, then alcohol dependence, and followed by common stress (Phelan & Basow, 2007). In addition, the individuals were most likely to be conceived as being dangerous if they had alcohol dependence (Phelan & Basow, 2007). In terms of social distance, there was least desire for social distance from those who had common stress and the most distance desired from those who had alcohol problems (Phelan & Basow, 2007).

While still looking at stigma and how it affects perceptions of mental illness, Martin et al. (2000)[8] studied how 'disturbing behavior', labels, and causal attributions can affect how the public feels about individuals who have a mental illness (p. 208). Although they did not look at perceptions of danger, as in the studies by Phelan and Basow (2007) and Link and Cullen (1986), Martin et al. (2000) still took the idea of perceptions and studied how different

interactions and attitudes manifested from the label that surrounds mental illness. In order to conduct the research, a survey was administered to a random sample of 1,222 participants (Martin et al., 2000). While studying, the researchers looked at five different factors that have a role in a person's willingness to interact with individuals who have a mental illness. This included the nature of the behavior, causal attribution of the behavior, the labeling of "mental illness", and sociodemographic characteristics of those who responded to and took place in the survey (Martin et al., 2000). In addition, the researchers briefly looked into perceived dangerousness of a person with mental illness, which correlates with the research done by Phelan and Basow (2007) and Link and Cullen (1986).

Martin et al. (2000) found that the labeling of mental illness is prevalent in today's society. They also found that people with mental health problems are seen as being as dangerous as other persons who do not have a mental illness . Therefore, Martin et al. (2000) directly correlates with the study done by Link and Cullen (1986). Their findings found that individuals do not tend to label the mentally ill as dangerous (Link & Cullen, 1986). Therefore, though the findings are fourteen years apart, they are both still prevalent in society today. Though the individuals perceived the mentally ill as being no more dangerous than others, they still displayed stigmatizing attitudes towards them (Martin et al., 2000). This was done by showing the desire to stay away from those who showed alcohol and drug dependence, which is characterized as a form of mental health issues (Martin et al., 2000). In addition, though the individuals who participated in the survey did not see individual with mental illness as dangerous, they preferred being physically separated from them (Martin et al., 2000).

2.2. Mental Illness And Social Work

Examining of social work students' attitudes towards individuals with mental illness is necessary for a number of reasons. Upon looking into past research, there were some implications as to how social workers and social work students feel towards working with individuals who suffer from a type of mental illness. Among these, the most evident was in the research conducted by Theriot and Lodato (2012)[9]. In their study, they looked at how social work students versus non-social work students differed when comparing attitudes towards mental illness (Theriot & Lodato, 2012). In addition, they looked at perceptions of professional danger, which is unlike the other types of contact danger that was studied in previously mentioned research. Theriot and Lodato (2012) looked at 175 students, 120 of which were social work students, and determined their attitudes towards working with the mentally ill. Say what they found here.

Social work students are generally seen as individuals who are better at showing compassion and empathy. Therefore, results of the study by Theirot and Lodato (2012) were in line with common social work labels. According to Theriot and Lodato (2012), social work students showed less fear, less avoidance, and were more willing to work with and help individuals who were suffering from a type of mental illness when compared to individuals who were not social work students (Theriot & Lodato, 2012). Therefore, thought there were no other differences in attitudes, the study proved that individuals who are studying to be social workers show a greater sense of compassion and understanding for those who are part of populations that are typically harder to work with (Theriot & Lodato, 2012).

Based on the exiting literature, I hypothesize that social work students will have more favorable attitudes towards mental illness than non-social work students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

This study was conducted on 90 undergraduate students, which ranged from freshman to senior level in academic standing. Of these students, 41 (46%) were social work students and 49 (54%) were non-social work students. The participants were recruited from a range of classes that the researcher had access to at a small liberal arts college in South Carolina.

3.2. Measures And Procedure

Before the survey was distributed, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research study (IRB #18015). Study participants were approached by the researchers within their normal classroom setting. Participants were then read a consent form before being given the survey. The consent form consisted of the researcher's names and contact

information. The form also included information about informed consent, how long the survey would take to complete, and what the research was inquiring. In addition, the consent form let participants know that they were able to take themselves out of the research process at any time. After being read the consent form, they completed the survey within five to ten minutes.

Participants answered ten demographic questions about their gender, age, race, religious preference, school classification, and major. The last two demographic questions inquired whether the participants had a history of mental illness or if they knew someone with mental illness. The remaining ten questions inquired about the participant's perceptions towards individuals with mental illnesses. These questions were based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Simple frequencies were reported for the demographic variables. The Mann-Whitney test was used to assess the difference in attitudes towards social and non-social work students.

4. Results

4.1. Demographics

The study examined a range of demographic factors. Specifically, it asked for the participants' gender, age range, race, religious preference, and classification (see table 1 below). In terms of gender, it was found that majority were female at 77%. The rest consisted of male, at around 22%, and other, at 1%. When looking at age range, 68% were made up of 18 to 20 year olds. The rest of the sample consisted of 23% ranging from 21 to 23 and 8% being 24 and older. Race consisted of 59% of the sample being made up of white or Caucasian and 36% being black or African American. In terms of religion, the dominant make up consisted of 81% of the sample being Christian. The other 19% consisted of Buddhist, unaffiliated, and other. Classification included the largest sample being juniors at 42%. 29% were freshmen, 19% were sophomores, and 10% were seniors.

Table 1. Demographics

Variables	Percentages (number)
Gender	
Male	22% (20)
Female	77% (69)
Other	1% (1)
	Total = 100% (90)
Age Range	
18-20	68% (61)
21-23	23% (21)
24-26	4% (4)
27 or older	4% (4)
	Total = 100% (90)
Race	
Black or African American	36% (32)
Hispanic or Latino	2% (2)
White or Caucasian	59% (53)
Other	3% (3)
	Total = 100% (90)
Religion	
Christian	81% (73)
Buddhist	1% (1)
Unaffiliated	10% (9)

Other	8% (7)
	Total = 100% (90)
Classification	
Freshman	29% (26)
Sophomore	19% (17)
Junior	42% (38)
Senior	10% (9)
	Total = 100% (90)

4.2. College Majors

The study also looked at the sample breakdown by major. The findings show that the sample was fairly evenly spilt between social work majors and non-social work majors. Specifically, 46% were social work majors and 54% were non-social work majors. (see table 2 below).

Table 2. College Majors

Is your major Social Work?		Sociology	2%
Yes	46%	History	1%
No	54%	Psychology	2%
	Total = 100%	Marketing	1%
If no, what is your major?		Philosophy	1%
Mass Communication	1%	Physical Education	2%
Biology	4%	Computer Science	1%
Business	1%	Athletic Training	2%
English	1%	Digital Information Design	1%
Exercise Science	10%	Fine Arts	1%
Human Nutrition	4%	Individualized Studies	1%
Sports Management	2%	Undeclared	3%
Human Resources	4%	Not Applicable (Social Work Majors)	44%
Education	7%		Total = 100%

4.3. Knowledge Of Mental Illness

In addition to demographics, the survey inquired whether the participants had knowledge of mental illness prior to participating and taking the survey. When asked whether the participants knew someone with a mental illness, an overwhelming 80% stated yes while 19% stated no. In addition, when asked if the participants had or currently were suffering from a mental illness, 32% said yes and 68% said no (see table 3 below).

Table 3. Knowledge of Mental Illness

Do you know someone with a mental illness?	
Yes	80%
No	19%
	Total = 99% (missing data)
Do you have or have you had a type of mental illness?	
Yes	32%
No	68%
	Total = 100%

4.4. Attitudes Towards Mental Illness

After demographics and knowledge on the topic, the participants were asked to answer 10 questions on their personal attitudes towards mental illness. When looking at whether a person with mental illness would improve if given treatment, 46% agreed and 44% strongly agreed, with the other 10% being either disagree or neither agree or disagree. In terms of whether a person with mental illness has himself or herself to blame, 77% strongly disagreed and 19% disagreed, with the other 4% covering neither agree or disagree, agree, or strongly agree. When asked if the participants believed a person with mental illness can be as successful at work as others, 52% agreed, 40% strongly agreed, and the remaining 7% neither agreed or disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. When looking at treatment, 51% agreed that treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives, while 39% strongly agreed and 10% neither agreed or disagreed. 0% disagreed or strongly disagreed. When it comes to whether people are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness, the answers were more smattered than the rest of the survey answers tended to be. 10% strongly disagreed, 42% disagreed, 17% neither agreed or disagreed, 23% agreed, and 8% strongly agreed.

4.5. Mann-Whitney Tests

As previously stated, the purpose of the research was to see how social work majors differed from non-social work majors in terms of their attitudes towards mental illness. To do so, Mann-Whitney tests were used in which the researchers were able to see how social work students answered attitude questions versus non-social work students. While running tests, it was found that the research had four statistically significant questions and answers. In order to decipher Mann-Whitney results, researchers looked at lower means as being higher disagreement. When given the statement "People are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness", the mean rank of those who were social work students was 38.44 as compared to 51.41 of those who were non-social work students. Therefore, social work students were more likely to disagree that people show more care towards those with a mental illness, with a p value of .014 (p≤.05) (see table 4 below). When given the concurring statement "I believe a person with a mental illness is a danger to others", the mean rank of social work students who disagreed was 37.76 in comparison to 51.98 of non-social work students. These results concluded that social work students were more likely to disagree that a person with mental illness is a danger to others, with a p value of .006 (p≤.05) (see table 5 below). When given the statement "I believe a personal with mental illness is unpredictable", social work students with a mean rank of 39.99, were compared to non-social works students with a higher mean rank of 50.11. This proved that social work students were more likely to disagree that a person with a mental illness is unpredictable, with a p value of .051 (p≤.05) (see table 6 below). Lastly, when looking at the statement "I believe a person with mental illness is hard to talk with", the social work students had a mean rank of 40.00, while the non-social work students had a mean rank of 50.10. This concluded that social work students were more likely to disagree that a person with mental illness is hard to talk to, with a p value of .051 (p≤.05) (see table 7 below).

Table 4 Mann-Whitney Test 1

	Is your major Social Work?	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
People are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness.	Yes	41	38.44	1576.00
	No	49	51.41	2519.00
	Total	90		

Table 5 Mann-Whitney Test 2

	Is your major Social Work?	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
I believe a person with mental illness is a danger to others.	Yes	41	37.76	1548.00
	No	49	51.98	2547.00
	Total	90		

Table 6 Mann-Whitney Test 3

	Is your major Social Work?	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
I believe a person with mental illness is unpredictable.	Yes	41	39.99	1639.50
	No	49	50.11	2455.50
	Total	90		

Table 7 Mann-Whitney Test 4

	Is your major Social Work?	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
I believe a person with mental illness is hard to talk with.	Yes	41	40.00	1640.00
	No	49	50.10	2455.00
	Total	90		

5. Discussion

5.1. Attitudes Discussion

When deciphering and configuring data results, it was proven that social work students are more aware of the stigma that exists among mental illness, as compared to non-social work students. In addition, social work students were more likely to see people with mental illness as being someone they wanted to work with and interact with, as compared again to non-social work majors. Social work students were more likely to see that people are not generally caring and sympathetic to people with a mental illness. Social work students were more likely to see a person with a mental illness as not being a danger to others. Social work students were less likely to find a person with mental illness as being unpredictable. Social work students were less likely to find a person with mental illness as being hard to talk to. Overall, attitudes were better among social work students than any other undergraduate major.

5.2. Implications For Teaching

In terms of implications for practice, there is a need for general education classes that instruct on mental illness. This would help improve all job performance for individuals who are instructed to work alongside or with someone with a mental illness in their future after college. Also, there is a need for more specified courses regarding working with those with mental illnesses among social workers. Social workers work with all kinds of individuals and those with a mental illness make up a majority. Lastly, there is a need for cultural competence training on working with people who have mental illness. Though it is needed for social workers, it is also needed for anyone who is going to work with individuals who have or have had a mental illness. Overall, social work students show less fear, less avoidance, and are more willing to work with and help individuals who are suffering from a type of mental illness when compared to individuals who are not social work students (Theriot & Lodato, 2012).

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