

A QUESTIONNAIRE TO ASSESS SOCIAL STIGMA

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SUMMARY

Psychiatric patients often suffer for two reasons: due to the illness and due to the social stigma of mental illness, that increases the uneasiness and psychic pain of the person suffering from serious psychiatric disorder. This unwell person is often the object of stigma because he is "different" from others, and he also can be marginalised by society. In this study we intend to assess whether these marginalising attitudes might be also present among mental health professionals who have presented psychic problems in a previous period of their life, against sick persons suffering of the same illness even if he is a mental health professional. Two questionnaires have been developed, one for professionals and another for the patients, with the aim of identifying these marginalising attitudes. We intend that this study shall be a multicenter, observational and international study, promoted by the Mental Health Dept. of Naples (ASL Naples 3 South, Italy).

Key words: social stigma - mental illness – questionnaire - psychiatric professionals

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INTRODUCTION

Persons suffering of serious mental illness are still viewed with suspicion and are often marginalised. Social stigma occurs ubiquitously both in Western Countries, for example in Germany (Angermey 1997) or in UK (Crisp 2000), and in Eastern Countries, for example in Hong Kong (Chou 1996) and Singapore (Lai 2001). The "stigma" (which means taint; from the ancient Greek στίγμα) is a sign that negatively distinguishes a person: it is as an additional difficulty for him/her which deeply affects the social life of the patients and their family (Casacchia 2005).

Social stigma is a bias to be overcome with correct information being given by the mass-media. The aim of our statistical survey is to assess how severe are the effects of stigma on human relationships between mental health professionals and patients. We propose to do this by creating a questionnaire to self-administer to professionals and patients, and then to collect, register and process the questionnaires for the final statistical analysis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The project of observing how many difficulties, uneasinesses, prejudices or marginalising attitudes against mental illness existed between psychiatric professionals and patients, developed from the observational clinical experience of the Mental Health Department of Torre del Greco (ASL Na3 South – Naples, Italy).

The Psychoanalyst C. Jung talks about the Greek Myth of the centaur Chirone (Smith 1997): the "woun-

ded healer" who is more sensitive in understanding who those who suffer and is more empathic with the sufferer, and, because he has experienced suffering, is more able to treat it. In 2006 a study has shown that 75% among the 253 counselors and psychoterapists who work in the Mental Health Field have suffered mental health problems personally (65%) or in their families (10%), and this directed their choice to work in the psychiatric field (Barr 2006).

During the development of this article, we used the notion of the "wounded healer", but at the same time we wished to study in depth the eventual difficulties which psychiatric professionals who suffered from psychiatric illness might experience in taking care of psychiatric patients.

In this study we shall observe whether there were eventual problems in treating psychiatric patients when psychiatric professionals suffered of mental illness. The clinicians who have suffered psychiatric problems relate best with patients who do not reactivate memories of unresolved mental issues which they have experienced or are experiencing. Avoidance of the patient by the clinician, either consciously or subconsciously, can be caused by a recrudescence of the clinician's own illness. Infact, in these cases the patients could be inadequately treated; besides, psychiatric professionals might have similar prejudices against other psychiatric professionals suffering from or who have suffered from mental illness. On the other hand, we shall also assess whether (and how much) a psychiatric patient likes or not to be taken care of by psychiatric professionals who have suffered from mental illness. Then, we shall focus on eventual marginalising attitudes among the patients.

Table 1. Questions put in The Questionnaire for the psychiatric professional

Age:		Qualification:	
a) till to 30 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) Psychiatrist	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) from 31 to 40 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) from 41 to 50 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) Nurse	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) from 51 to 60 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	d) Social Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) over 60 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	e) Technician in rehabilitation service	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex:		Place of work:	
M	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) public	<input type="checkbox"/>
F	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) private	<input type="checkbox"/>
		province (_____)	nation (_____)

Questions

Please, give only one answer, choosing the closest

- Did you choose to work in Psychiatry?
 - YES
 - NO
 - Why did you choose to work in this sector?
 - a) Because of Personal Interest
 - b) Because of Scientific Interest
 - c) Because it was easy to get an opportunity to work in this sector
 - Why are you still working in Psychiatry?
 - a) By Choice
 - b) Out of necessity
 - Have you experienced Psychological or psychiatric problems?
 - YES
 - NO
- *if NO, go to the answer number 13!*
- If Yes, what sort of problem?
 - a) Mood or Affective Disorders
 - b) Anxiety Disorders
 - c) Psychotic Disorders
 - d) Personality Disorders
 - e) Substance abuse
 - In which period of your life did the problems begin?
 - a) Infancy
 - b) Adolescence
 - c) Adult Life
 - Were you or are you being treated for your problem?
 - YES
 - NO

Please, allowed also more than one answer

- What sort of therapy?
 - a) Medication
 - b) Psychotherapy
- Has your problem caused / Does your problem now cause difficulties in the exercise of your profession?
 - YES
 - NO
- Do you feel that a patient with a problem similar to yours could reactivate your problems?
 - YES
 - NO

- Would you have difficulty treating a patient with a problem similar to yours?
 - a) NO
 - b) A little
 - c) Quite a lot
 - d) A great deal
- What would you do if you have to treat a patient with a problem similar to yours?
 - a) I must look after him
 - b) I will delegate the care of the patient
 - c) I will minimise the illness

Please, indicate a single answer; the one which is most representative or frequent

- Have you ever worked with a colleague who is affected by a mental illness?
 - YES
 - NO
- *if NO, go to the answer number 19!*
- If Yes, what was the diagnosis?
 - a) Mood Disorders
 - b) Anxiety Disorders
 - c) Psychotic Disorders
 - d) Personality Disorders
 - e) Substance abuse
 - How do you relate to him?
 - a) I avoid him/her
 - b) I am forced to work together
 - c) I tell him/her to get treatment
 - d) I look after him/her
 - How do you feel about how you relate to your mentally ill colleague?
 - a) Good
 - b) Necessary
 - c) Defensive
 - How does your mentally ill colleague relate to you?
 - a) He/she is aggressive
 - b) He/she is diffident
 - c) He/she is absent frequently from work
 - d) He/she shows gratitude
 - Do you believe that someone who cannot look after himself can look after others?
 - YES
 - NO
 - Do you have psychiatric problems?
 - YES
 - NO

• *only continue if the answer is affirmative!*

Table 1. Continous

20. How do your colleagues behave towards you?			24. Do you believe that you should be protected from their behaviour?	
a) well	<input type="checkbox"/>		YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) badly	<input type="checkbox"/>		NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Are you afraid to tell your colleagues about your illness?			25. Have you ever wished to change your workplace?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>		YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>		NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Do your colleagues comment on your absences from work?			26. Has it ever been ‘‘suggested’’ to you that you should change your workplace?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>		YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>		NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Do your colleagues band together against you?			27. Do you want to continue working in psychiatry?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>		YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>		NO	<input type="checkbox"/>

Table 2. Questions put in The Questionnaire for the psychiatric patient

Age:		What is your level of education?	
a) till to 30 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) from 31 to 40 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) Middle	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) from 41 to 50 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) Secondary	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) from 51 to 60 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	d) University	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) over 60 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	e) Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex:		Work Status:	
M	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) Student	<input type="checkbox"/>
F	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) Unemployed	<input type="checkbox"/>
Where do you receive treatment?		c) Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>
a) public	<input type="checkbox"/>	d) Housewife	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) private	<input type="checkbox"/>	e) Pensioner	<input type="checkbox"/>

Questions

1. Do you know that you are ill or were ill?		7. Have you got difficulties about talking to others about your mental illness?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
• <i>only continue if the answer is affirmative!</i>			
2. Of what type of illness?		8. If Yes: why?	
a) Mood Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) They judge me badly	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Anxiety Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) They do not understand me	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Psychotic Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) I do not want people to be sorry for me	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Personality Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	9. How do you relate to the other mental health patients?	
e) Learning Disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	a) I push them away	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Substance abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) I understand them because they suffer	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) We become friends	<input type="checkbox"/>
(specify) _____		10. What would you think of psychiatry professionals if you knew them to have mental health problems?	
3. In which period of your life did the problems begin?		a) They cannot possibly treat their patients well	<input type="checkbox"/>
a) Infancy	<input type="checkbox"/>	b) They should change their work	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Adolescence	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) They can understand me better because they are unwell themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Adult Life	<input type="checkbox"/>	11. Have they ever told you ‘‘you are mad and you understand nothing?’’	
4. Are you presently being treated for your problem?		YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>	12. When others avoid you and or act badly towards you what do you do?	
<i>Please, allowed also more then one answer</i>		a) I become angry	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. What sort of therapy?		b) I isolate myself/cry	<input type="checkbox"/>
a) Medication	<input type="checkbox"/>	c) They do not avoid me	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Psychotherapy	<input type="checkbox"/>		
c) Psychosocial Rehabilitation	<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Does/did your suffering cause problems between you and others?			
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>		
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>		

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

We shall carry out a statistical study of how mental illness induces stigma in the patients and the professionals; study how stigma among professionals affects patients and clinicians who are unwell mentally; and finally study whether also among the patients might be marginalising attitudes among the patients (both professionals or normal persons).

We carried out the formulation, elaboration and development of two unpublished questionnaires, for self-administration, one for the psychiatric professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social workers, technicians for the rehabilitation service), and another for the patients: one questionnaire was developed to be given to clinicians to assess stigma; the other questionnaire was developed to be given to patients to assess the suffering due to stigma. Both questionnaires allow complete anonymity respecting privacy rights and they before have been tested as sample to confirm their simplicity and functionality. The collection of data is over six months (starting in the second half of the year 2015).

We shall study the impact of stigma between population by these questionnaires : there is no risk to the physical or mental health of the interviewed (The subjects must always be of majority age, and totally informed about the aim of the study and its complete anonymity respecting his privacy rights), and if he would not like to answer some of the questions he will not be obliged to do so.

The questionnaire for the psychiatric professionals will assess the stigma experienced by clinicians in relation to the patient being treated and in relation to a colleague affected by mental problems, which reinvolve psychic suffering in the subject during his work.

The questionnaire for the patients will assess the stigma by the patient with regards to himself, the other patients, and with regards to clinicians who are affected by psychiatric or psychological disturbances.

Finally, we shall do a statistical evaluation collecting all data and comparing with other centres where research data has been collected. The tables 1 and 2 describe the questions written in the two questionnaires.

CONCLUSIONS

This scientific multicenter study has been approved by the Ethical Committee of the Health Service called "ASL Napoli 3 Sud (in the Campania region, Italy) on June 17th 2015 (the pilot-team is at Torre del Greco Mental Health Department, ASL Naples 3 south). After collecting the data, we shall publish the results and

disseminate them, and also discuss the eventual difficulties of preventive work related to stigma among clinicians working in psychiatry. Other additional scientific centers may collaborate to this project in the future by contacting us.

The scientific commission that collaborated in creating, formulating, and elaborating the structure and development of the questionnaires is composed by: Maurilio Giuseppe Maria Tavormina (Naples), Romina Tavormina (Naples), Eugenio Nemoianni (Naples), Giuseppe Tavormina (Brescia), Marcello Nardini (Bari), Immacolata d'Errico (Bari), Francesco Franza (Avellino), Nicolas Zdanowicz (Louvain), Manlio Grimaldi (Naples).

Persons who would like to have the official questionnaires, should please contact the authors of this study.

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Conflict of interest: None to declare.

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