

Mental Illness Stigma and Gender: A Survey of Colorado College Students

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Abstract

Many studies have been done on mental illness stigma and its potential causes and solutions. However, of the seven studies which were analyzed in the literature review their primary focuses were on variables which would decrease stigma, rather than those which potentially lead to stigma. An online survey of nine questions was created to test the influences of gender and/or personally knowing someone with a mental illness on mental illness stigma. The survey was then distributed to Colorado college students on various online forums. The results of the survey concluded that college-aged males show more mental illness stigma than college-aged females. It was not possible to determine the effects of knowing an individual with mental illness on level of mental illness stigma. These results could help future researchers determine aspects that may lead to mental illness, how prevalent it is in different circles, and which groups should be focused on being educated.

Keywords: mental illness, mental illness stigma, college, media, gender

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Researchers who perform experiments to measure mental illness stigma widely focus on the testing of an independent variable which may decrease a populations mental illness stigma. For example, Pearl, Foregeard, Rifkin, Beard, and Björgvinsson (2016) studied the effect of treatment on internalized stigma of patients with mental disorders. Boysen (2017) explored the relationship between stereotypically masculine or feminine disorders and mental illness stigma. Along the same lines of discussing variable relationships in terms of mental illness stigma, Klin & Lemish (2008) developed a compilation discussion of previous research preformed concerning the connection between media influence and mental illness stigma. In each study, there end up being many confounding variables including age, gender, economic class, college major, etc. This empty area of general causes could be very key to better understanding ways to prevent mental illness stigma from its start rather than having to find a way to combat an already developed issue. The articles of Boysen (2017) and Klin & Lemish (2008) concerned the relationships between masculinity and media on mental illness stigma in an exploratory general way, but failed to explore the casual relationship between them. By using social media as a platform to investigate the connection between gender and mental illness stigma, a new light can be shined on the cause-effect relationship of common confounding variables on mental illness stigma.

Methods

The research question for the mental illness survey was comprised of two parts and included two hypotheses. Research Questions:

What is the relationship between gender and mental illness stigma? What is the relationship between knowing someone with mental illness and mental illness stigma?

H1: Males will show a higher rate of stigmatization of mental illness than females

H2: People who know individuals who are mentally ill will have a lower mental illness stigma

The participants chosen for this online survey were similar to those chosen for Theriot's (2013) study on the effects of a popular media seminar on new college students mental illness stigma., in that they were undergraduate college students and would have knowledge of popular media. The population was selected through a combination of both purposeful and random sampling, also known as stratified sampling. The specifics of the chosen group were undergraduate college students attending various Colorado colleges. The randomness of the participant population was associated with the chance aspect related with who would or would not choose to take the survey based on the forums on which it was posted. This posting was done within two separate online forums, one of which was my own personal Facebook page and the other a University of Colorado Boulder sub-community on the website Reddit, which a friend of mine who attends the school is a part of. The recruitment style of this survey was entirely online and casual in nature, both postings used colloquial language and politely asked for participation in the survey.

The survey description was that of the provided University of Denver IRB: "By completing the following questions, you are also granting consent for this information to be used as part of a research project that I am completing for a course at the University of Denver. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide may be used in a project and may be published online and/or in print, but your identity will remain anonymous. While profile

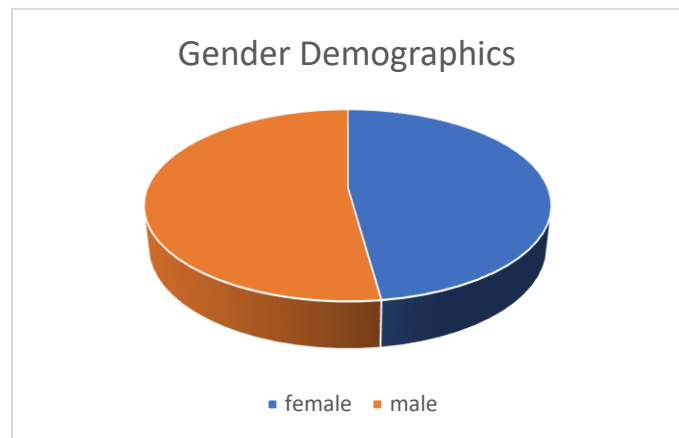
information you volunteer in this survey may be included in my writing project (i.e. your age, sex, class standing, etc.), your name and identity will NOT be used or reported. If at any time you do not want to answer a question, or do not want to complete the questionnaire, you do not have to. There were no survey materials provided to the participants, but a general definition was provided within one of the question descriptions.”

This online survey was created with Google forms. It was comprised of nine questions of varying type, split into two sections. The first section consisted of a few demographic inquiries in the form of multiple choice questions. These questions collected information about one of the variables being tested for, gender, as well as potential confounding variables including age and which Colorado college or university they attend. This question concerning participant’s college of attendance was a short open-ended fill in the blank question, it acted as a moment of freedom in the middle of the handful of close-ended questions. The next couple of questions were meant to be the bridge into the general topic of mental illness, and included a general definition of mental illness. The first regarded the variable in the second hypothesis, knowing someone with mental illness, and contained the definition of mental illness to be “any mental disorder or illness that interferes with the way a person behaves, interacts with others, and functions in daily life” (Lloyd, 2016). The second dealt with the degree of severity of mental illness. These segue questions got the survey participants thinking about the overall topic. The second section of the survey was equipped with a new set of directions within the description that read: For the following statements, rate how much you agree: 1 being strongly disagree, 2 being disagree, 3 being agree, 4 strongly agree. This section was based on the Likert scale model of statement rating. It contained four generally negative statements on the topic of mental illness, which can be found in Appendix A. The statements were worded in a way that the participants wouldn’t

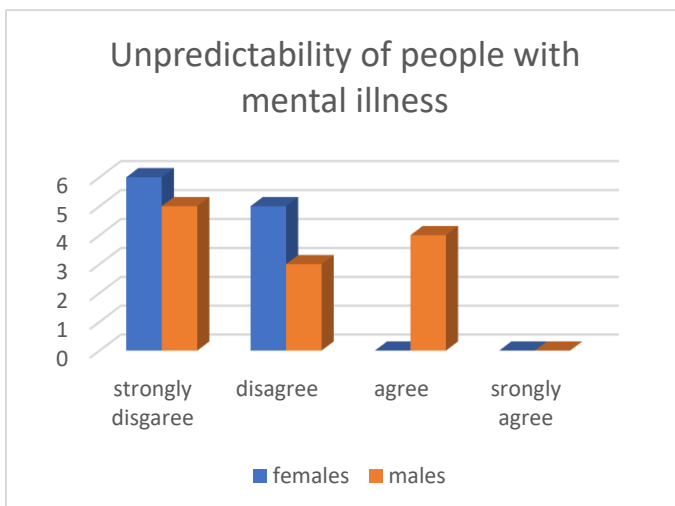
feel as though they were being forced into answering one way or another. Results were compiled with use of Google Forms individual participant responses and had transcription into Microsoft Excel.

Results

Colorado college students (N=23) participated in an online survey on mental illness stigma. Of the 23 participants, the number of females (n=11) and males (n=12) were almost even. Though the entire sample of participants (N=23) all attend Colorado colleges, the majority at 47.8% (n=11) of the sample attend the University of Colorado Boulder.

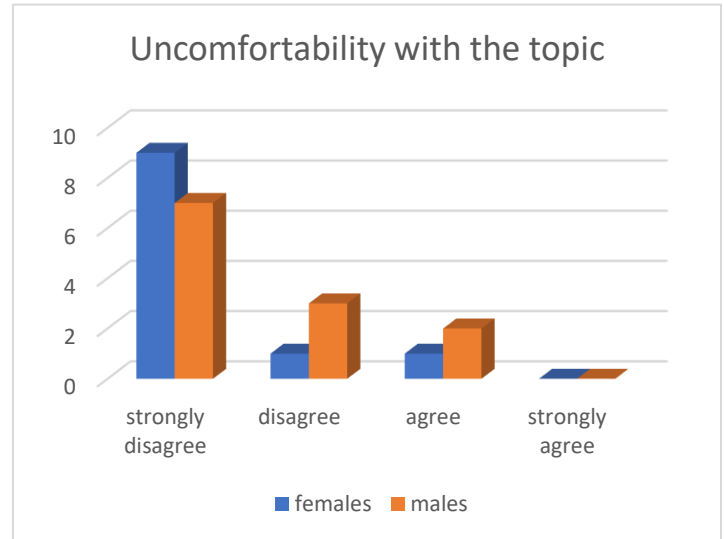


H1: The first hypothesis that males would show more mental illness stigma than females was



confirmed based on the information obtained from the survey results. 33.3% (n=4) of males (n=12) agreed with the statement “people with mental illness are unpredictable or frightening” while 0% of females (n=11) agreed with the same statement. Neither males nor females responded with strong agreement toward the statement.

Males (n=12) were overall more uncomfortable discussing mental illness with 16.7% (n=2) of them agreeing with the statement “I feel uncomfortable discussing the topic of mental illness” as compared with the 9.1% (n=1) of females (n=11) who chose option 3 ‘agree’.



H2: Based on the results of 100% of the participants (N=23) answering ‘yes’ to the question concerning personally knowing someone with mental illness, it is impossible to determine refutation or confirmation of the second hypothesis. This is because every participant identified themselves as knowing at least one individual with mental illness, so there is no difference across the population in the variable being tested.

The multiple-choice question concerning the severity of mental illness in present day received interesting results. 82.6% (n=19) considered the issue of mental illness to be widespread, while 17.4% (n=4) considered it to be a small concentrated problem, and 0% (n=0) considered for it not to be a problem at all.

Most males and females disagreed with the statement “people with mental illness are dangerous to themselves and others”, with 81.8% (n=9) of females (n=11) and 75% (n=9) of males (n=12) choosing either ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’. However, while only 18.2% (n=2) of females (n=11) agreed with the statement 25% (n=3) of males (n=12) agreed with the statement, with 8.3% (n=1) strongly agreeing.

The majority of males and females agreed with the statement “mental illness is portrayed negatively in the media” with only 4.3% (n=1) of the total participant population and 8.3% (n=1) of the male (n=12) population disagreeing with the statement.

Discussion

The online survey proved to only give results that could answer one of the two presented questions. The first of the hypotheses regarding the likelihood of males to show more mental illness stigma than females, was confirmed by the survey data. These results were significant because of the nearly even number of female and male participants. The original hypothesis was developed based on aspects shown within popular media and television shows, of males being portrayed as less stereotypically mentally ill and as having more stigma than females. Men and women differ in the mental illnesses which they are likely to be diagnosed with. As Boysen (2017) explores in his study on masculinity and mental illness stigma this difference leads people to act differently to different disorders. Due to the broad definition given within the survey of mental illness as, “any mental disorder or illness that interferes with the way a person behaves, interacts with others, and functions in daily life” (Lloyd, 2016) it may have prompted the participants to think of the presently more common mental disorders of anxiety and depression, which are known to affect more women than men.

The results of males showing more mental illness stigma than females may mean that men should be more targeted by education about mental illness. In each previous study discussed, the focus on education as means to combat mental illness stigma is strongly enforced. Specifically, within Theriot (2013) study, as he directly tested the effectiveness of an educational seminar on decreasing mental illness stigma and it proved to at least be effective in the short-term.

Interestingly, though males showed higher numbers of agreement with negative statements regarding mental illness, they showed less agreement with the statement regarding negative portrayal of mental illness within the media. This may mean that there is a link between showing signs of mental illness stigma and being unaware of a connection between media and negative portrayals of mental illness. Further, males showed less comfortability with the overall topic of mental illness. This may indicate a link between mental illness stigma and lack of comfortability with the topic of mental illness. This potential link could be studied more in depth by future researchers.

The second question which covered the effects of knowing someone with mental illness on held mental illness stigma, resulted in an inability to be answered due to every participant surveyed answering 'yes' to the question "have you ever known someone with mental illness?". This led for the hypothesis that knowing someone who is mentally ill would decrease mental illness stigma to neither be confirmed nor denied, because there were no responses equated with not knowing someone who is mentally ill to compare the two.

The unanimous responses of positivity for the 8th question (see Appendix A) could be because of the focus that modern media places on the acknowledgment of mental illness and the mentally ill. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, etc., which are widely used by college students, are all subject to posts and campaigns about being knowledgeable about mental illness and respectful towards those who are mentally ill. This allows for the younger generations, such as college-aged, to be more open with their friends and family members about their own or other mental illnesses. College students who may be subject to these types of posts and campaigns on their own social media platforms, could have their own stigma decreased.

These results of 100% of the sample population knowing at least one person inflicted with a mental disorder shows the prevalence of mental illness in the lives of this population, and could be applied to future research about whether this prevalence stretches across general populations of college students and/or college aged people. Within future research, and use of a more allowing IRB, it is also worth exploring whether the people that these students know to have a mental illness are also college students, or if they are others within their friend and family circles. These findings could give an insight to the differences in mental illness stigma experienced by people depending on who it is they know with mental illness. As well as how their responses to the negative statements might change based on their different relationships and experiences they have, these may influence their views of mentally ill.

The primary limitations of this survey were that of the sample population used. Almost half of the participants surveyed attended the University of Colorado Boulder, and every one of the participants attended a Colorado college. It can be assumed that half of the participants were people that I directly know. These guidelines were first implemented to limit potential confounding variables of age and location. However, it was not considered that though each person surveyed is currently attending a Colorado college they may not all originally be from Colorado. This potential difference in origin may lead to different views of mental illness. The confounding variable of location, or state of origin could be an aspect further researched in the realm of mental illness stigma. Future researchers may also be interested in comparing the results of a survey such as this one in a state school population versus the population of a community college or private school, and see how those results may differ from one another.

These survey results may be used to further the knowledge of the usefulness of social media on decreasing mental illness stigma. If it were possible for the media to use their widespread power

of influence, specifically over college students, to discuss mental illness in a positive and educational light, then this population of college-aged people may be positively affected within their interactions and thoughts about those that they know or do not know who have a mental disorder.

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Appendix A

Online survey questions:

1. What gender do you identify as? (male/ female)
 2. How old are you? (18,19,20,21)
 3. What college in Colorado do you attend? (type in)
 4. Have you ever known someone with a mental illness? (mental illness is defined as any mental disorder or illness that interferes with the way a person behaves, interacts with others, and functions in daily life)? (yes/no)
 5. Based on your knowledge of mental illness, it is more likely to be defined as which of the following: (a small concentrated problem, a widespread issue, not a problem)
- 6-9 were statements rated on a Likert scale: (1-4 from strongly disagree to strongly agree)
6. People with mental illness are unpredictable or frightening
 7. I feel uncomfortable discussing the topic of mental illness
 8. People with mental illness are dangerous to themselves and others
 9. Mental illness is portrayed negatively in the media