The Development of Perceptions of Mental Illness and Help-Seeking Behaviors

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Introduction

There is a fairly prominent public stigma surrounding mental illness and seeking psychological treatment [4, 6, 9]. Research suggests that this stigma can be manifested in the form of a desire for social distance, most notably in the cases of depression, schizophrenia, and substance use disorders [10]. Children often have views of mental illness similar to their parents [2], and a more negative belief about mental illness is associated with a greater desire for social distance [3]. However, research suggests that children are able to conceptualize mental illness in a surprisingly sophisticated way [7]. Education and experience with mental illness can further develop these sophisticated beliefs [2, 8]. However, not much within-subjects research has been conducted surrounding this topic. Thus, it is important to investigate specific factors that influence the development of perceptions of mental illness and help-seeking behaviors in individuals.

The present study examines this question through a set of retrospective online self-report questionnaires including: measures of desired social distance, beliefs about mental illness, help-seeking stigma, and experience with mental illness. Inferential statistical tests as well as correlational analyses were conducted in order to determine (1) whether or not desires for social distance and beliefs changed over time and (2) whether or not these measures can be predicted by experience with mental illness.

Method

Participants.

Participants were 407 emerging adults (67.6% female, 84% Caucasian, mean age = 19.10 SD = 1.85) who completed an online self-report questionnaire.

Measures.

- **Demographic information** was collected (i.e., sex, race, age, experience with mental illness).
- **Beliefs toward Mental Illness Scale** [5] – The BMI is a 21-item self report questionnaire on a 6-point Likert scale (α = .91).
- Social distance was measured using a 7-item questionnaire rated on a 7-point Likert scale [1] in response to 3 vignettes adapted from Link [6] describing individuals with depression, schizophrenia, and substance use disorder.
- **Self-Stigma of Seeking Help** [11] – The SSOSH is a 10-item self-report questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert scale (α = .91).

Results

- **Bivariate Correlations**
  - Childhood scores on social distance measures for depression, schizophrenia, and substance use were all significantly correlated to emerging adulthood scores for the same measures.
  - Current beliefs about mental illness significantly correlated with current desire for social distance from all three mental illnesses. Current beliefs about mental illness were also significantly correlated with help-seeking stigma.
  - Most correlations with experience scores were not significant, except for social distance from depression in childhood and childhood beliefs about mental illness.

- **Dependent Samples T-Tests**
  - Each participant’s desire for social distance from individuals with depression was measured based on both childhood beliefs and current beliefs. The result of a paired samples t-test was significant, t(406) = -7.514, p < .001, indicating that participants currently desire more social distance from these individuals than they did in childhood.
  - Each participant’s desire for social distance from individuals with schizophrenia was measured based on both childhood beliefs and current beliefs. The result of a paired samples t-test was significant, t(406) = -5.107, p < .001, indicating that participants currently desire more social distance from these individuals than they did in childhood.
  - Each participant’s desire for social distance from individuals with substance use disorder was measured based on both childhood beliefs and current beliefs. The result of a paired samples t-test was significant, t(406) = -8.697, p < .001, indicating that participants currently desire more social distance from these individuals than they did in childhood.

Conclusion & Implications

The study expands the literature that mental health stigma still exists. The study also expands upon literature that suggests the stigma surrounding mental illness is associated with a stigma surrounding psychological help-seeking [9]. This is evidenced by the significant correlation between current BMI and SSOSH. However, it contradicts the idea that stigma manifests itself in the form of desire for social distance [10]. Participants in this study expressed a desire for more social distance than in childhood, but also expressed significantly negative beliefs about mental illness. The results of the study also demonstrated that beliefs about mental illness change as a person develops, but does not implicate experience with mental illness as a contributing factor.

Future research on this topic should begin by developing a more reliable measure of experience with mental illness. Additionally, a study producing more conclusive results would likely be longitudinal and follow individuals from the time they were young children. This would allow for more accurate assessments of desire for social distance and beliefs about mental illness, eliminating bias that often comes with self-report.