The influence of media image priming on attitudes towards mental illness

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1. Introduction

- Research has found negative representations of mental illness to be salient throughout the mass media, which has the potential to negatively influence attitudes the public may form towards sufferers of mental illness (Anderson 2003).
- Media sources often report inaccurate information about those with mental illnesses, and tend to link them with violence and other undesirable characteristics (Overton and Medina 2011).
- The researcher aimed to investigate the influence of media image priming on the attitudes people express towards those with mental illnesses.
- It was hypothesised that there would be differences in participants’ attitudes depending on the priming stimuli they were exposed to, their sex, age range, and the subject they studied.

2. Method

- A between subjects design was used.
- The survey included the Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination Scale (PDDS) (Link et al. 1987a cited in Vogel, Wade and Ascheman, 2009), the Social Distance Scale (SDS) (Link et al. 1987b cited in Angermeyer and Matschinger, 2003), and the Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help (PSOSH) scale (Vogel, Wade and Ascheman 2009). The scales were modified to assess participants feelings about others with a mental illness.
- The Dependant variable was the attitude being measured whilst the Independent variables were; the priming conditions, the participants age range, their sex, and the subject they studied.
- Participants: 100 University of West London undergraduate students, 60 female and 40 male.
- Prior to completing the survey participants were exposed to priming stimuli which portrayed those with a mental illness in either a positive or negative manner, or a neutral prime which did not mention mental illness at all.

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3. Results

- For all three attitudes measured participants who were exposed to the negative priming stimuli, expressed more of a negative attitude towards those living with mental illnesses than participants exposed to positive priming stimuli.
- Following a statistically significant ANOVA a Bonferroni post hoc test for the PDDS found a significant difference between positive and neutral conditions p < .01 and between negative and neutral conditions p < .01.
- Following a statistically significant ANOVA a Bonferroni post hoc test for the PSOSH scale found a significant difference between the positive and neutral conditions p < .01.
- Statistically significant interaction effects between the priming conditions and participants sex (males exposed to negative stimuli expressed more negative attitudes than females exposed to positive priming stimuli), were found for the PDDS F (2,77) = 1.29, p < .01 and the SDS F (2,77) = 3.04, p < .05.
- Males over the age of 26 were more likely to devalue and discriminate against the mentally ill than participants who were female and under the age of 26. F (1,77) = 2.96, p < .05.
- Results for the SDS found that older participants exposed to negative priming stimuli were more likely to distance themselves away from the mentally ill than younger participants exposed to positive priming stimuli F(2,77) = 2.55, p < .05.

4. Discussion/Conclusion

- The present study provides some support for the idea that negative media exposure of the mentally ill can lead to stigmatizing effects.
- Due to the gender division in attitudes expressed towards mental illness, more work should be done to assess why this may be.
- If the media can negatively influence attitudes towards mental illness, it is possible that positive representations of mental illness can help to reduce mental illness stigma.
- The mass media needs to be encouraged to provide the public with more accurate information about mental illnesses.

5. References