**The Social Injustice of the Experiences of Stigma and the Well-being of the Stigmatized**

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**Abstract**

There has been controversy surrounding the magnitude and direction of the effects of labeling and stigma specifically in the area of mental illness. Labeling can instantaneously prompt both positive consequences through treatment and negative consequences through stigma. This paper seeks to tackle the challenges in which those with mental illness face through stigma as well as the financial exploitation used in retrieving an exponential amount of gain through those who suffer. And finally, adequately finding a solution to combat the problems surrounding mental illness as a whole and diminishing the stigma in society one step at a time.

Mental illness is a mental or emotional disorder which substantially impairs a person’s cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral function which include but are not limited to depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Stigma is a term conveying a profound, shameful mark or flaw related to being a member of a group that is degraded by the societal mainstream such as the mentally ill. Mental illness today is still perceived to be a sign of weakness. The experiences of stigma that the mentally ill must face include shame, blame, secrecy, the “black sheep of the family” role, isolation, social exclusion, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Can you think of the worst thing that one can be called in modern society? Think of the following terms: crazy, nuts, loco, psycho, schizo, deranged; just to name a few words given upon those who suffer from mental illness. There are few restrictions placed upon terms of ridicule to denote mental disorder, making it allowable and common to label the mentally ill as “retards”, “crazy” or even “insane.” Because of the countless names used to describe the mentally ill, people who stigmatize them, usually justify placing restrictions of rights upon the stigmatized. The devastation of being invisible, shameful and toxic can make anyone, particularly the mentally ill to feel unwanted.

***Schizophrenia***

There is no doubt that there is a stigma associated with mental illness and in general, schizophrenia in particular. Schizophrenia is a severe, disabling brain disorder and people diagnosed with this mental disorder can often experience both delusions and hallucinations which can lead to seeing and hearing things that are not there and believe things that are not true. Many individuals with schizophrenia are devalued and discriminated against because of their mental illness with 70% of those with well-controlled schizophrenia admitting in a 2002 study that they still worry about being viewed unfavorably because of their illness. People who have their misconceptions of this mental disorder also cause society to fear those who suffer from it.

**Public Attitudes towards the Mentally Ill**

It appears as though when people encounter persons with mental illness, they respond with dislike, hatred, and fear. “Studies suggest that the majority of citizens in the United States and many western European nations have stigmatized attitudes about mental illness” in which the people are prejudice, endorsing negative stereotypes towards the mentally ill (Corrigan & Watson 12). People fail to realize that at the end of the day, people with mental illness are simply people but not extraterrestrial beings that other should run from.

***Stereotypes, Prejudice, & Discrimination***

A normal and a stigmatized person differ when perspectives are questioned. Stigma (like beauty, as the saying goes) ‘is in the eye of the beholder’ evidently supporting the concept of stereotypes of mental illness. Stereotypes are about selective opinions that place people in categories, exaggerating differences between groups; depicting “them” and “us” to obscure differences within groups. Because of stereotypes, people, specifically the mentally ill are easily dismissed as the stigmatiser maintains social distance. The same stigma placed upon the mentally ill can result in family members and friends turning their backs on them.

**Exploitation**

***Negative Representations of Mental Illness Made by the Media***

Whether it’s a detailed depiction or an implying comment, the media often paint an ugly and incorrect picture of the mentally ill. Depictions made by individuals about mental illness can largely influence society’s perspective. Research has shown that many people get their information about mental illness from the mass media, leading them to fear, avoid and discriminate against individuals with mental illness. A common ideology about mental illness portrayed by the mass media is, people with mental illness being violent. For instance, the television series *Gotham* on FOX, depicts the infamous comic book series of Batman where in the show, he character Edward Nygma suffers from what it looks to be autism spectrum disorder in which he then violently kills his colleague. However, studies found that mental illness alone does not depict violent behavior whatsoever.

***Financial Abuse***

People who suffer from mental illness are mostly helpless to abuse and exploitation including physical abuse, sexual abuse, negligence, and financial exploitation. Caring for a person with a mental illness can require a lot of time, work, and money. Sometimes the stress of the task can cause caregivers to provide insufficient care or even abuse the mentally impaired person. This can put the mentally impaired at increased risk for neglect and abuse compared to others who are mentally adequate.

A study facilitated by research from Brown University found that in the United States, 46% of people with mental illnesses remained in the nursing home facility 90 days after admission compared to only 24% of people who do not suffer from mental illness; resulting in longer-than-average stays. This study may suggest that the outcome is due to the fact that Medicaid pays nursing homes higher rates for people with mental illness, which may provide an incentive for nursing homes to admit such patients battling mental illness.

**Solutions**

Sympathy for the mentally ill and love for all of mankind in general are conceivable initiatives towards destigmatization. Advocating for education of the public and contact between the public and mental patients as ways to combat stigma, paving the way for greater strides in destigmatization. Ultimately, I believe that the solution to stigma will come from more effective treatments of mental illnesses, rather than voluntary or persuaded compassion because people struggle to lose wrongful misconceptions of others that have been already been embedded in their minds, even if it is mentally ill people. To overcome the stigma of mental illness, individuals should practice these methods such as:

* Avoid using common labels such as “retarded” or “the mentally ill.” Avoid using terms like crazy, lunatic or slow functioning.
* Highlight abilities, not limitations, when talking about someone who has a mental illness. Everyone has strengths that are not related to a mental illness, and you can focus on those when discussing an individual.
* When someone makes a stigmatizing statement, clarify why the statement was hurtful and how imperative it is to fathom mental illness as a disease.

**Conclusion**

The social injustice of stigmatizing mental illness should not be taken lightly and people should seek to be well educated when it comes to a mental illness before labeling a person. There is lots to learn over a span of time before people can put a rest to being prejudice and discriminatory against not only the mentally ill but others as a whole as well. I truly believe with the resources and advancements in health care, stigmatizing mental illness will soon be no more.

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