

# Students' Attitudes toward Mental Illness: An Exploratory Study

Jahnabi Mahanta<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study aimed at investigating students' perceptions and beliefs about mental illness. A checklist containing 10 items was developed. The sample consisted of 25 male and 25 female master degree students. Before administering the interview schedule, a handout explaining the meaning of mental illness was given to the participants to ensure uniformity in the participants' understanding. Participation was voluntary and all participants were given an information sheet about the project prior to participation and completed a consent form. Thematic analysis method was used to interpret their responses. A lot of differences were seen in their responses to the 10 items. A lack of knowledge about mental illness was identified. Participants recognized exposure through the media as a tool to increase knowledge.

**Key Words:** *attitude, mental illness*

## Introduction:

The term attitude refers to people's evaluation of virtually any aspect of their social world. The concept of attitude originated in the US. It was intensively used by Thomas in 1918. Some attitudes are quite stable and resistant to change, while others may be unstable and show considerable variability depending on the situation (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Attitudes give meaning to our behaviour. The attitudes can be framed regarding individuals and groups. Attitudes are more or less stable, they are lasting but they are also subject to change provided there is proper atmosphere.

A mental illness is also called a mental disorder, psychopathology or psychiatric disorder. According to DSM-IV, a mental disorder is a psychological syndrome or pattern, which occurs in an individual, and causes distress via a painful symptom or disability, or increases the risk of death, pain, or disability; however it excludes normal responses such as grief from loss of a loved one, and also excludes deviant behavior for political, religious, or societal reasons not arising from a dysfunction in the individual. Mental disorders are surprisingly common. For example, a study conducted by the World Health Organization examined the

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<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati.  
Email: jahnabi26@gmail.com.

prevalence, or frequency, of mental disorders in people visiting medical doctors in primary care settings in 14 countries. The study revealed that 24% of these people had diagnosable mental disorders and another 10% had severe symptoms of mental disorders (Üstün & Sartorius, 1995). The cause of a particular mental illness could be genetic or environmental factors like parent-child relationship, attachment and security, learned behavior, etc.

Mental illnesses are among the most common conditions affecting health today, both in rural and urban areas. There is a very less research done in this particular area. It is important to analyse and understand the attitudes of the present generation people towards mental illness. Most mental health patients face the problem of stigmatization and discrimination because of lack of awareness among the people. Some people may hesitate to go for treatment because of fear of being labeled as "mental" or "psycho".

The current study aims to explore the students' attitudes toward mental illness. To understand the issues an in-depth a review of literature was undertaken by the researcher. Meera Patel and John Rose (The University of Birmingham, UK) conducted a study on "Students' attitudes toward individuals with an intellectual disability" in the year 2014. Their main aim was to investigate attitudes held by a British student population towards individuals with an intellectual disability. Participants were made to engage in a focused group discussion. It was seen that there is a need to modify the current attitude scales or develop new ones to measure the British population's attitudes towards intellectual disabilities. The participants lacked proper knowledge about intellectual disabilities.

F. Gill et.al conducted a study on "General practitioners' attitudes to patients who have learning disabilities" in the year 2002. It was seen that general practitioners as respondents held positive attitudes to working with patients who have learning disabilities. Attitudes varied according to respondents' age and frequency of professional contact with this patient group. There was a strong association between attitudes and emotional experiences.

While there has been considerable practical progress in the inclusion of people with Intellectual Disabilities (e.g. Rose, 2009), people with learning disabilities can still be subject to discrimination and stigma (Jahoda and Markova, 2004). This can be overt through direct discrimination such as bullying (Gillen, 2007); however, a number of recent reports have demonstrated broader discrimination in other areas such as the provision of health care; for example, recent reports suggest that many deaths of people with intellectual disability are avoidable (Mencap, 2012). This evidence suggests there is still significant progress needed in changing the attitudes of many people in the society towards people with

intellectual disabilities, and having effective measures of attitude are essential to monitor and evaluate change.

Attitudes held towards individuals with an intellectual disability can have wide-ranging effects on the individual and may impact upon opportunities for employment, housing, health and education (Siperstein et al., 2003). The identification of attitudes towards those with an intellectual disability is important to identify potential prejudice and develop a baseline that can be used to enhance relationships (McManus et al., 2011).

Siperstein et al. (2007) administered a survey to five thousand students questioning their attitudes towards the inclusion of peers with an intellectual disability. Results indicated students had limited contact with other students with an intellectual disability. Students believed individuals with an intellectual disability can participate in non-academic classes, but not in academic classes, and view inclusion as having both positive and negative effects (Siperstein et al., 2007). Research investigating attitudes, knowledge and behaviour towards those with an intellectual disability may help the government achieve strategies aimed at improving the lives of those with an intellectual disability.

There is a lack of research on this particular topic in India. Not just rural India, but even the urban parts lack awareness about mental health problems. Superstitious beliefs and misconceptions still exist. It is important to look into this problem immediately so that people with mental health problems are accepted into the larger society. The present study will help in understanding the factors which affect people's attitudes toward mental health.

### **Methodology:**

The main research question was what are students' attitudes toward mental illness? The main objective of the study was to explore students' attitudes toward mental illness.

### **Operational Definitions:**

**Attitudes:** It refers to a person's beliefs and perceptions about any aspect about their social world.

**Mental Illness:** It refers to a wide range of conditions or disorders that affect the person's mood, thinking process and behavior. It causes dysfunction in work, interpersonal relationships and self-care.

**Methods:** A Sample of 25 male and 25 female master degree students studying in Jain University, Bangalore were randomly selected for the study. The students were randomly selected from their attendance register. Participation was voluntary and all participants were given an information sheet about the project

prior to participation and completed a consent form. To ensure their understanding of what mental illness meant, a simple description was given to them. Then, they were asked to honestly respond to the 10 item checklist developed by the researcher. The interview method was used to obtain the responses of the participants. The responses were thematically analysed under 10 specific themes.

Tools of Assessment: a) Socio Demographic Data and b) A checklist containing 10 items were developed by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis:**

#### **Theme 1: Awareness about mental illness**

Most of the participants seemed to have a vague idea about mental illness. Participants perceived the concept of mental illness to represent restricted areas of functioning and dismissed the impact on social relations and daily living. Students often stated their perceptions of physical disabilities when asked about mental illness. Although they were given a brief description about what mental illness meant, it was difficult for them to grasp or write about it. They were also asked to name a few mental disorders they knew about. Most of them mentioned schizophrenia, autism, memory loss problems, multiple personality disorder, etc.

#### **Theme 2: Role of media in portrayal of mental illness**

Student's attitudes towards the media's portrayal of mental illness varied. Some students stated the media can be used as a tool to educate individuals on mental illness. Other students believed the media does not accurately portray individuals with a mental illness. In particular, the media fails to show the contribution those with a disability can make to society. Other students stated television documentaries were a positive source of information, especially if portrayed from the viewpoint of the individual with a disability. Overall, students seemed to have been exposed more to mental illnesses through the media than through education in schools and colleges. However, they believed that there are chances that media may either over or under emphasize the signs and symptoms of a particular mental disorder.

#### **Theme 3: Experiences related to someone with a mental health problem**

The participants were asked to describe their experiences of being or dealing with someone with a mental health problem. Only 18 participants out of 50 had experiences to share regarding knowing someone with a mental health problem. One of the participants said it is difficult to be around someone with a disorder because their behavior is un-predictable.

#### **Theme 4: Relationship/work/live with a friend with a mental health problem**

Respondents didn't have much to say regarding this topic. Some of them said that they already have so much to take care of that they can't imagine living a normal life with a person with a mental health problem. And when it comes to working with a person with a mental problem, participants thought that it will be difficult to complete tasks smoothly. It would be more time-consuming. Some of them expressed that it is not easy to acquire the cooperation from someone with a mental health problem.

#### **Theme 5: Difficulties or rewards of caring for someone with a mental health problem**

People gave unique responses to this particular theme. A few of them said that by caring for someone with a disability, they would feel good about themselves. They said that doing something like that would contribute to self-satisfaction. Some participants expressed their fear of being around a person with a mental disorder.

#### **Theme 6: Pros or cons of integrating a person with mental illness with the rest of the community**

It was seen that maximum number of respondents believed that it will be helpful if a person with a mental health problem is made to get involved with rest of the community. Some of them also said that if the community is more patient and caring towards the mental health patient, it would help the patient to function normally. However, respondents also believed that the normal functioning among the people may get fractured and disrupted.

#### **Theme 7: Stigma and discrimination**

When the participants were asked if people with mental illnesses were stigmatized and discriminated, some of them responded saying it was obvious that they would be discriminated because of their low functioning level. Stigma about mental illness leads people to fear disclosing that they have mental health problems, which may prevent treatment and recovery. Stigma and discrimination can result in limited life opportunities. It poses barriers for public health prevention efforts designed to minimize onset of mental illness and the prevention or worsening of symptoms over time. It can also result in lower prioritization for public resources allocated to mental health services and poorer quality of care delivered to people with mental illness.

#### **Theme 8: Treatment of patients with mental health problems**

Respondents commonly perceived that treatment of patients with mental health problems could help only to an extent. However, they seemed optimistic about

treatment for mental health patients. Most participants didn't have much idea about how much psychological or psychiatric help could do to help a mental health patient. So, they were prompted to think about therapy and medication. That is when they thought it may help the patients to a minimum extent but they would require constant attention.

### **Theme 9: Family and community's perspective**

When respondents were asked if their family and community believed that mental health problems are to be kept a secret, they responded saying that most of them would want to keep it a secret. People would be concerned about ruining the family's social status. They may not want to reveal it because it may bring shame to the family. It is believed that if the illness of a particular member was revealed, then it would be difficult for the rest of the family to attain certain opportunities as well. However, they seemed to be caring and sympathetic towards people with mental health problems.

### **Theme 10: Introspection**

The respondents were asked what they would have done and felt if they knew that they had a mental health problem. Some of them responded saying they would try and do everything it takes to function normally. They said they would feel ashamed about it but eventually they would overcome the shame and undergo treatment. Most of the respondents believed that their respective families would take care of them.

Overall, respondents seemed to be very under informed about the issue of mental health problems. Some respondents did seem to be empathetic and concerned about the importance of awareness about mental health problems.

### **Conclusion:**

The current study was titled "Students' attitudes toward mental illness". It mainly aimed at exploring how students perceived people with mental health problems. After analysing the responses of 50 participants, it was seen that most of them are under informed about what mental illness meant. They had confusion between physical illness and mental illness. However, they expressed concern, empathy and care towards people with mental health problems.

It was seen that, there is a need to conduct awareness camps and workshops based on mental health issues, to avoid stigmatization and awareness.

Limitations: The sample size was very small due to time constraint. The checklist could have been more appropriate. The results obtained cannot be generalized to the entire population apart from the selected sample of interest

Implications: The results of the current study can serve as a base for further research in the same area. The results also help in understanding the level of awareness about mental health problems among students.

Mental Illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions or disorders that affect the person's mood, thinking process and behaviour. Many people have mental health concerns from time to time. But a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect his/her ability to function. A mental illness can make a person miserable and can cause problems in his/her daily life, such as at work or in relationships. In most cases, symptoms can be managed with a combination of medications and counseling (psychotherapy).

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