



GESDAV

Beliefs about mental disorders among media practitioners in southwest Nigeria

Oluwole Lateef Olutoyin, A. O. Akinhanmi

ABSTRACT

Background: The media professionals are a potent and unique factor in conveying messages about mental health that educate the public. It is pertinent to assess beliefs about mental disorders among the media professionals. **Objective:** The study set out to determine the beliefs about mental disorders among media practitioners in southwest Nigeria. **Materials and Method:** The World Psychiatric Association questionnaire measuring attitudes toward Schizophrenia was modified and administered to the two study groups. **Results:** The findings from the results showed only a third of all respondents had contact with either an advert or promotion about mental illness. Respondents ranked environmental factors foremost among causes of mental illness. Majority (80%) of the respondents were of the opinion that the mentally ill are dangerous to the public because of their violent behavior. **Conclusion:** The study revealed predominance of negative beliefs about mental disorders among media practitioners.

¹Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, ²Department of Clinical Science, Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Aro, Abeokuta, Nigeria

Address for correspondence: Dr. Oluwole Lateef Olutoyin, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria. E-mail: sartolu1@yahoo.com

Received: October 01, 2014

Accepted: November 25, 2014

Published: December 06, 2014

KEY WORDS: Beliefs, mental disorders, media, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Media is the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines that reach or influence people widely [1]. A media practitioner is one who is trained and practices the art of communicating through any of the aforementioned means to the people. Nigeria, the most populous black nation in the world, has a population of about 180 million people. The country's media have been described as one of the most vibrant in Africa with over one hundred local radio stations, about one hundred television channels and more than 100 news prints [2]. The Southwest Nigeria, historically, where the first television in Africa was established remains the media hub of the country Nigeria posted its first newspaper in 1859 [3]. Given the media-infused society, as it exists today in Nigeria, the media are too important to be ignored or avoid.

The media have been identified as the most important source of information about mental health issues. The study, by the Glasgow University Media Group, confirmed the belief that people who saw a strong link between mental illness and violence derived their beliefs largely from the media [4]. Many other studies have found a definite connection between negative media portrayals of mental illness and the public's negative attitudes toward people with mental health issues [5-12].

Stigmatizing beliefs about individuals with mental health problems are held by a broad range of individuals within society, regardless of whether they know someone with a mental health problem, have a family member with a mental health problem, or have a good knowledge and experience of mental health problems [13-15]. The media professionals are a potent and unique factor in conveying messages about mental health. The important negative depictions by journalists as reported in newspapers, on television; and shown in cinema dramas or home video movies in present Nigerian context are very common.

In addition to problematic portrayals in the broadcast media, the majority of newspaper stories of mental illness in North America associate psychiatric illness with violence, crime, danger, and unpredictability [16,17].

In general, the public does not understand the impact of psychiatric disability and frequently fears people with these disorders. Members of the community withhold opportunities related to housing, work, and community participation [18].

The consequences of these grossly inaccurate media portrayals are serious for people who have mental illnesses, in terms not only of the direct harm that it causes them to see how they are depicted but also because of the actions of others towards them that have serious consequences for their legal and other rights.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample frame for the study is the membership register of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Ogun State chapter obtained from the union’s secretariat in Abeokuta. The total number of journalists obtained is 250 (January, 2008); and of this over 200 are in Abeokuta.

The sample frame was entire membership (218) of the NUJ Chapter from the study area. A total of 205 registered media professionals, from the six different chapels of the chapter, was recruited for the study following informed consent and assurance of confidentiality of the exercise. However, only 154 analyzable questionnaires were considered.

The instrument used was adapted from a toolkit developed for the World Psychiatric Association Program to Reduce Stigma and Discrimination Because Of Schizophrenia [19-21]. The original questionnaire was modified by substituting the term “mental disorder” for “schizophrenia,” and specific items relating to the symptoms of schizophrenia were deleted. Data analysis was done using the 16th version of Statistical Package for Social Sciences program (Softonic.com/s/spss-version 16).

RESULTS

The respondents’ ages range between 20 and 62 years with a mean age of 34.7 (standard deviation [SD]8.7) years. About two-third (64.9%) of the respondents were males, and 80% are Christians. Four fifth of the respondents attained higher (postsecondary) education. The mean number of years of work experience was 8.9 (SD 8.7) years.

Exposure of Respondents to Mental Illness and People with Mental Illness

About half of the respondents, 70 (45.5%) have come in contact with either adverts or promotions about mental illness.

Less than half (42.9%) of those who had come in contact with the information on mental illness had done so through television; about one-fourth got information through newspapers while one-fifth did so through radio. The least sources of information include the internet, books, billboards, and pamphlets.

Table 1 shows respondents’ knowledge about the causes of mental illness. Environmental related causes were the most cited by about half (48.1%) of the respondents. Stress was the most mentioned among the environmental causes.

Drug-related causes were the most cited among the medical causes (29.2%). About a tenth of the respondents cited supernatural factors, such as afflictions by evil doers, as possible causes of mental illness. Genetic cause of mental illness was mentioned some of the by respondents.

The various ways by which the respondents could be exposed to issues about mental illness were highlighted in Table 2. It

revealed almost all (99%) of the journalists did not have exposure through mental health services; and the majority (83%) was not exposed to sundry effects of mental illness.

As shown in Table 3, less than half of the respondents did not believe that mental illness could be successfully treated outside the hospital in the community.

Most of the respondents in the study 152 (98.7%) believed the mentally ill would need prescription drugs to control their symptoms.

Significantly, majority of the respondents (80.5%) believed the mentally ill are a public nuisance while only a quarter (25.3%) of the respondents believed that the mentally ill could work in regular jobs. Majority of the participants (80%) were of the opinion that the mentally ill are dangerous to the public because of violent behavior.

DISCUSSION

Respondents’ Knowledge about Causes of Mental Illness

Environmental factors, including stress, have been the most mentioned causes of mental illness by the respondents in both groups in this study. About 50% of the respondents ranked environmental factors, such as physical and emotional or psychological stress, foremost among other causes of mental

Table 1: Respondents’ knowledge of causes of mental disorder

Cause	Respondents n=154 (n [%])
Environmental (stress)	74 (48.1)
Medical (drug)	45 (29.2)
Supernatural	15 (9.7)
Medical (others)	11 (7.2)
Genetic	9 (5.8)

Table 2: Respondents’ exposure to mental illness

Exposure	No (%)	Yes (%)
Exposure to advert or promo about mental illness	84 (54.5)	70 (45.5)
Exposure to news about people with mental illness	89 (57.8)	65 (42.2)
Exposure to working in mental health services	152 (98.7)	2 (1.3)
Exposure to treatment of mental illness	91 (59.1)	63 (40.9)
Exposure to effects of mental illness	129 (83.8)	25 (16.2)

Table 3: Beliefs of respondents about mental illness

Belief (people with mental illness)	Frequently/often (%)	Rarely/never (%)
Can be successfully treated outside hospital community	79 (51.3)	75 (48.7)
Tend to be mentally retarded or of lower intelligence	116 (75.3)	38 (24.7)
Need prescription drug to control their symptoms	152 (98.7)	2 (1.3)
Are public nuisance due to odd behavior	124 (80.5)	30 (19.5)
Can work in regular jobs	39 (25.3)	115 (74.4)
Are dangerous to the public because of violent behavior	124 (80.5)	30 (19.5)

illness. This finding is consistent with that of some other authors. MORI (1990) and Maclean (1969) found that 66% and 83%, respectively, saw stress as a major cause [22,23]. This is in contrast to another Nigerian study by Iliyasu and Last (1991) on mental illness in Kano, Northern Nigeria, where the respondents mentioned drugs as a leading cause of mental illness [24]. Drug use ranked second (29%) as a leading cause of mental illness mentioned by respondents in this study. This perhaps reflects the public awareness of the prevalence of illicit drug use and the possible outcome of such lifestyle.

The respondents in this study attached less importance to the “supernatural” as a cause of mental illness, with only about a tenth of them citing “demons,” “evil doers,” “voodoo” as possible causes of mental illness. It is, however, ironical that a group of professionals have, unfortunately, caused an upsurge in the broadcast of these beliefs in the media [25]. Adewuya and Makanjuola (2005) reported 49% prevalence concerning widespread belief in supernatural factors as the cause of mental illness [26].

In another study by Adebowale and Ogunlesi (1999), “supernatural factor” was the most acceptable etiological proposition among Nigerian psychiatric patients and their relatives and this was reported more by patients with previous psychiatric hospitalization and those of below secondary level of education [27]. Odejide and Olatawura (1979) in an earlier study in Western Nigeria claimed that many of the “formal” educated respondents in their study attached less importance to the traditional beliefs of the causes of mental illness than to environmental and emotional factors [28].

Beliefs about Mental Illness

The stereotype of mental illness often perceived by many is that of a ragged, tattered vagrant psychotic person. The paucity of knowledge about mental health problems might probably be responsible for this constricted view of the mentally ill.

Majority (71%) of the journalists in the study considered people with mental illness as having lower intelligence or being mentally retarded. This study is at variance with the study by Wolff *et al.* (1996) who claimed that three-quarters of British respondents felt the mentally ill were of the same intelligence as other people [29]. The respondents’ view about the intelligence of the mentally ill could have arisen from the societal beliefs that mental illness affects reasoning, coupled with the higher level of prejudice and stigma prevalent in developing countries, hence such people are not expected to be intelligent. Some of the respondents also believed people with mental disorders cannot work on regular jobs. This may emanate from the misperception that people with psychiatric disability have fewer opportunities to work than the general population, mostly owing to the many misperceptions and prejudices about their abilities and needs.

About 80% of journalists saw the mentally ill as a public nuisance due to odd behavior. Furthermore, 80% of the journalists

considered the mentally ill as dangerous to the public because of violent behavior. This is in concordance with common depiction of the mentally ill in the media as people who are violent and criminal [6,8,11,12].

Typically, views such as those of dangerousness and low intelligence have been found to fuel community resentment of people with mental illness [30,31].

Again, a picture of a disorganized psychotic person in the mindset of respondents in both groups in the study would influence the views of the respondents. Majority, (70.2%) of respondents believed the mentally ill could “never/rarely” work in a regular job.

The negative beliefs about the mentally ill held by the media practitioners may be attributed to their lack of intimate exposure to issues about mental illness and people with mental illness. Many of the respondents had come in contact with the information about mental illness through the vicious circle of prejudiced media. Thus, the media would need to be educated on issues of mental health.

REFERENCES

1. Dictionary .com available from: <http://www.dictionaryreference.co/browse/unabridge>.
2. BBC News Africa: Nigeria Profile (Media). Available from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13949549>. [Last accessed on 2013 Sep].
3. National Open University of Nigeria: History of Nigerian Mass Media, MAC 113; 2012. p. 32.
4. Philo G. Mass media representations of mental health: A study of media content. Glasgow: Glasgow University Media Group; 1993.
5. Coverdale J, Nairn R, Claasen D. Depictions of mental illness in print media: a prospective national sample. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 2002;36:697-700.
6. Cutcliffe JR, Hannigan B. Mass media, “monsters” and mental health clients: The need for increased lobbying. *J Psychiatr Mental Health Nurs* 2001;8:315-21.
7. Diefenbach DL. The portrayal of mental illness on prime-time television. *J Community Psychol* 1997;25:289-302.
8. Olstead R. Contesting the text: Canadian media depictions of the conflation of mental illness and criminality. *Soc Health Illness* 2002;24:621-43.
9. Rose D. Television, madness and community care. *J Community Appl Soc Psychol* 1998;8:213-28.
10. Wahl OF. Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; 1995.
11. Wahl O, Roth R. Television images of mental illness: Results of a metropolitan Washington media watch. *J Broadcast* 1982;26:599-605.
12. Wilson C, Nairn R, Coverdale J, Panapa A. Mental illness depictions in prime-time drama: identifying the discursive resources. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 1999;33:232-9.
13. Crisp AH, Gelder MG, Rix S, Meltzer HI, Rowlands OJ. Stigmatisation of people with mental illnesses. *Br J Psychiatry* 2000;177:4-7.
14. Moses T. Being treated differently: stigma experiences with family, peers, and school staff among adolescents with mental health disorders. *Soc Sci Med* 2010;70:985-93.
15. Wallace JE. Mental health and stigma in the medical profession. *Health (London)* 2012;16:3-18.
16. Shain RF, Philips J. The stigma of mental illness: Labeling and stereotyping in the news. In: Wilkins L, Patterson P, editors. *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press; 1991. p. 61-74.
17. Day DM, Page S. Portrayal of mental illness in Canadian newspapers. *Can J Psychiatry* 1986;31:813-7.
18. Corrigan P. Beat the stigma: come out of the closet. *Psychiatr Serv*

- 2003;54:1313.
19. Stuart H, Arboleda-Flórez J. Community attitudes toward people with schizophrenia. *Can J Psychiatry* 2001;46:245-52.
 20. World Psychiatric Association. WPA Programme to Reduce Stigma and Discrimination Because of Schizophrenia, 2002. Available from: <http://www.openthedoors.com/English/media/vol-3.pdf>. [Last accessed on 2008 Dec].
 21. Gureje O, Lasebikan VO, Ephraim-Oluwanuga O, Olley BO, Kola L. Community study of knowledge of and attitude to mental illness in Nigeria. *Br J Psychiatry* 2005;186:436-41.
 22. MORI (Market Opinion & Research International). *Mental Health- Public and Business Attitudes*. London: Research Project for Mental Health Appeal; 1990.
 23. Maclean U. Community attitudes to mental illness in Edinburgh. *Br J Prev Soc Med* 1969;23:45-52.
 24. Iliyasu M, Last M. Mental illness at Goron Dutse psychiatric hospital. *Kano Stud Spec Issue* 1991;3:41-70.
 25. Aina OF. Mental illness and cultural issues in West African films: Implications for orthodox psychiatric practice. *Med Humanit* 2004;30:23-6.
 26. Adewuya AO, Makanjuola RO. Social distance towards people with mental illness amongst Nigerian university students. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 2005;40:865-8.
 27. Adebawale TO, Ogunlesi AO. Beliefs and knowledge about aetiology of mental illness among Nigerian psychiatric patients and their relatives. *Afr J Med Med Sci* 1999;28:35-41.
 28. Odejide AO, Olatawura MO. A survey of community attitudes to the concept and treatment of mental illness in Ibadan, Nigeria. *Niger Med J* 1979;9:343-7.
 29. Wolff G, Pathare S, Craig T, Leff J. Community knowledge of mental illness and reaction to mentally ill people. *Br J Psychiatry* 1996;168:191-8.
 30. Hayward P, Bright JA. Stigma and mental illness: A review and critique. *J Ment Health* 1997;6:345-54.
 31. Corrigan PW, Watson AC. Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. *World Psychiatry* 2002;1:16-20.

© GESDAV; licensee GESDAV. This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.

Source of Support: Nil, Conflict of Interest: None declared.