AUTOMATIC STEREOTYPING AND PREJUDICE AGAINST PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

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Background: Similar to members of the public, people with mental illness may exhibit general negative automatic prejudice (e.g., general dislike) against their own group. However, it is unclear whether more specific negative stereotypes (e.g., danger or guilt) are automatically activated among diagnosed individuals and how such automatic stereotyping may be related to self-reported attitudes and emotional reactions.

Methods: We studied automatically activated reactions toward mental illness among 85 people with mental illness and 50 members of the general public using a Lexical Decision Task (LDT) as a measure of automatic stereotyping and a Brief Implicit Association Test (BIAT) as an index of automatic prejudice. Deliberately endorsed attitudes and emotional reactions were assessed by self-report.

Results: In the LDT, but not the BIAT, diagnosed individuals showed less negative automatic reactions toward mental illness than members of the public. Among members of the public, stronger automatic stereotyping in the LDT was associated with more self-reported shame about a potential mental illness and more anger toward stigmatized individuals.

Conclusions: Reduced automatic stereotyping in the diagnosed group suggests that people with mental illness may not entirely internalize negative stereotypes. Automatic prejudice, on the other hand, among stigmatized individuals could reflect dislike of one's ingroup as well as associations with non-stigmatizing negative attributes such as the pain of having a mental illness. Among members of the public, automatic stereotyping may predict negative emotional reactions to people with mental illness.