Special Issue: Stigma and bullying in individuals with intellectual disabilities

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We would like to welcome our readers to the special issue of the Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities on: *Stigma and bullying in individuals with intellectual disabilities.* In this issue we explore the experiences of stigma and bullying and its associations with mental wellbeing. This special issue complements the 2012 special issue on: *Maltreatment of individuals with Intellectual Disabilities* (issues 5(1) and 5(2)). We have decided to re-visit this highly important and relevant subject, as although some progress has been made in promoting the rights and welfare of people with intellectual disabilities, we have only touched the surface. We hope that this special issue stimulates further thought and action. The articles featured cover stigma and discrimination in a number of fields from education, health and social care services and the internet, which is evidence for the pervasive nature of such concepts.

Negative societal attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities are known to be widespread across continents, countries and cultures fuelled by misconceptions about aetiology, diagnosis and competence of people with intellectual disabilities (Edwardraj et al., 2010; Scior, 2015, Siperstein et al., 2011). Research has highlighted a lack of awareness within the general public of the term of intellectual disabilities (Scior, Potts & Furnham, 2013). In addition, common stereotypes include the belief that people with intellectual disability are incapable of leading “normal” lives such as being able to work, having relationships and children, and living independently.

Negative societal beliefs can be a barrier to the social inclusion of people with intellectual disability in society, leading to inequalities in accessing healthcare, education, housing and employment (Scior & Werner, 2016). In many countries, children with intellectual disabilities have no or limited access to education and when education is provided, it is often within segregated settings (UNESCO, 2015). In addition, despite the widespread change towards deinstitutionalization in most western countries, large scale institutions for people with intellectual disabilities, nevertheless, remain a norm in some countries. Being educated or residing in such settings may be associated with stigma, shame and embarrassment.

Saldhana and colleagues discuss the impact of “special education” and labelling on the lives of homeless youth using a qualitative study design employing “direct scribing” and narrative ethnography. The youths describe the negative impact of being labelled, the lack of perceived benefits of “special education” and experiences of stigma and bullying.

Beyond public stigma and stigma within school settings, research has shown that lack of knowledge and negative attitudes also exist amongst professionals, including nurses and doctors (Hoglund, Lindgren, & Larrson, 2013; Werner et al., 2013). This finding is of concern as such stigma may impede access to appropriate diagnosis, treatment and care. Two manuscripts within this special edition aptly explore the attitudes of professionals toward individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Spassiani and colleagues have conducted a qualitative study of individuals with intellectual disabilities, carers and support staff of their experiences of visiting the Emergency Department following a psychiatric crisis. They reported that participants felt dismissed or disrespected by staff at the Emergency Department and that staff were unable to adequately support the needs of this group, highlighting the continued need for education and training of workers.

Werner and Araten-Bergman explore the views and perceptions of social workers in relation to three groups of people: people who have mental illness, people who have intellectual disabilities, and people who have a dual diagnosis of intellectual disabilities and mental illness. Over 150 social workers completed a questionnaire on attitudes. The study found that social workers were more likely to believe that mental illness was self-inflicted compared to people with intellectual disabilities. However, individuals with intellectual disabilities and mental illness were perceived to be more dangerous, and social workers were more likely to endorse coercive and restrictive practices towards this group.

Both of these studies highlight how personal judgments pose a significant barrier to the social integration and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in society.

Stigmatising attitudes can have devastating and deleterious consequences for individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families including exposure to bullying and victimisation. Bullying refers to a form of aggressive behaviour in which an imbalance of power exists between the bully and the victim, and can take many forms from teasing and name calling, damaging one’s reputation and belonging, to making threats and physically assaulting the individual. Studies consistently show that bullying experienced by children and adults with intellectual disabilities is highly prevalent (Emerson, 2010; Mencap, 1999). Bullying can have a profound impact on self-esteem and wellbeing of the individual who is being bullied (Ali et al., 2015; Emerson, 2010)

Two of the manuscripts within this special issue focus on the experiences and impact of bullying. Using a qualitative design, Fisher and colleagues explore the understanding of bullying, experiences of and response to being bullied among individuals with William syndrome. They found that individuals did not only understood the concept of bullying, but they were often the victims of bullying. However, some individuals were able to resist bullying through self advocacy and promotion of their strengths.

Wright and colleagues examine the relationship between face to face bullying, cyber-bullying and depression in adolescents with intellectual disabilities and how this relationship may be modified by social support. High levels of social support reduced the association between cyber-bullying and depression. The authors highlight the importance of support from parents and teachers and make recommendations for intervention and prevention strategies.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, ratified by 172 countries, represents a major step in realising the rights of disabled people as equal and full citizens. The Convention places a duty on states to increase awareness of stigma and to combat prejudice and discrimination. However, tackling discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities appears to be of lower priority compared to other disabilities (Scior et al., 2015). The use of legislation to tackle social injustice and discrimination is a key priority.

Hamdani and colleagues critically analyse a mental health strategy that is aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination among individuals with mental illness. They discuss how a focus on living independently and being in employment can in fact have unexpected consequences for, and could contribute to further stigmatisation of people with intellectual disabilities who may not be able to reach this goal,. They emphasise that promoting other ways of being included in society could help to reduce stigma.

We would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this special edition. We have a wonderful mix of articles covering a range of different themes and perspectives, which we are certain will contribute to furthering our understanding of this very significant and pertinent topic.

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