Stigma of Psychological Therapy: Stereotypes, Interpersonal Reactions, and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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Although a considerable amount of research has demonstrated the stigma of mental illness, relatively little work has explored attitudes toward people involved in psychological therapy. In the present experiment, therefore, we investigated stereotypes of counseling center clients and examined how these preconceptions influence social interaction. Subjects, who were randomly assigned to be perceivers or targets, engaged in a brief getting-acquainted conversation. Targets were randomly assigned to conditions in which perceivers were told that their conversational partner, the target, had been recruited either from among students seeking psychological therapy (clients) or from students in introductory psychology courses (nonclients). As was predicted, perceivers rated clients less favorably than they did nonclients before they interacted. Furthermore, consistent with previous research on the self-fulfilling prophecy, judges' ratings of the interactions revealed that perceivers behaved more negatively toward clients than toward nonclients, and clients came to behave in a less socially desirable manner than did nonclients. Some potential influences of negative stereotypes on the effectiveness of therapy are considered.

Research has demonstrated that first impressions and stereotypes can influence social interactions in ways that lead to their behavioral confirmation — even to the extent of causing mistaken impressions to become real (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Rosenthal, 1973; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Snyder & Swann, 1978). In one study, for example, Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) investigated the process of behavioral confirmation of the stereotype associated with physical attractiveness. Their results revealed that men formed more favorable first impressions of female targets when they were led to believe that the target was physically attractive than when they thought that she was unattractive. Consistent with these first impressions, women interacting with men who believed that they were attractive then came to behave in a manner that was more socially desirable than did women conversing with partners who believed that they were unattractive. A self-fulfilling prophecy thus occurred (see Jones, 1977). Snyder et al. concluded that male perceivers used different styles of interaction for the two groups of targets. These behaviors, in turn, guided and constricted the behavioral options of female targets in ways that led them to conform to the men's initial impressions.

The reasoning outlined by Snyder et al. (1977) is similar in many ways to the processes proposed by Becker (1963) and Scheff (1966, 1974) relating to the labeling approach to social deviance. Labeling theory (see Scheff, 1974) suggests that once a person is labeled as mentally ill, preexisting stereotypes are activated in other people. With respect to mental illness, the public generally perceives mental patients and ex-mental patients as threatening and socially undesirable (Calicchia, 1981; Crumpton, Weinstein, Acker, & Annis, 1967; Franchia, Canale, Cambria, Ruest, & Sheppard, 1967). According to labeling theory, based on these perceptions, people systematically alter their expectations, vocabulary, and response cues when they interact with mental patients or ex-mental patients. Individuals who are labeled as mentally ill may then incorporate others' expectations into their own self-concepts (Jones et al., 1984), thereby leading to a further loss of self-control and continued deviant behavior.

Although there has been little systematic investigation, it appears that seeking psychological therapy may be associated with stigmatization similar to that associated with being mentally ill. Describing a person as seeking psychological therapy, like labeling a person as being mentally ill, implies that the person has psychological problems and is incapable of handling his or her own problems. Phillips (1963), for example, found that although the most negative attitudes were expressed toward people who had been in a mental institution, negative attitudes were also displayed toward people who sought psychological assistance from a clergyman or from a psychiatrist. Also, research by Goodyear and Parish (1978) and by Parish and Kappes (1979) indicates that a person described as seeking counseling is rated more negatively than is a "typical" person. Thus, a possible consequence for seeking professional psychological aid may be negative evaluations and rejection from others.

The present experiment investigated whether negative social perceptions currently exist concerning persons who seek psychological therapy at a University Counseling Center and examined how these negative social perceptions, if they exist, influence actual dyadic social interactions. Piner and Kahle (1984) demonstrated that stigmatization toward people labeled as mental patients is particularly strong in personal, ego-involving situations. Using a procedure similar to that used by Snyder et al. (1977), previously unacquainted subjects interacted in a conversation that had been structured to control the information that one randomly

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chosen dyad member (designated the perceiver) received concern-
concerning the client status of the other dyad member (designated the target). Client status information was controlled by the experi-
menter, who either informed the perceiver that the dyad partner was currently in psychological therapy at the University Coun-
seling Center (client) or made no mention of the target as a client at the counseling center (nonclient). The target was unaware of
the experimental manipulation. This experimental procedure pro-
vided an opportunity to test directly several predictions derived
from labeling theory. It was hypothesized that the perceiver would
form more negative impressions of the partner when the target
was believed to be seeking psychological aid than when no men-
tion was made about the target seeking therapy. Furthermore,
it was predicted that the perceiver would interact with the target in
ways that would lead to changes in the target’s behavior that would
confirm the perceiver’s initial negative impressions. Conse-
sequently, targets who were believed to be seeking psychological
aid were expected to behave in a less socially desirable manner as
compared to targets who were not believed to be seeking ther-
apy.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 68 male and 68 female undergraduates, who participated
in a study of “the acquaintance process in social interactions” in partial
fulfillment of their introductory psychology course requirements. Subjects
had a choice: whether to be in an experiment, whether to be in this ex-
periment, and whether they wished to withdraw from this experiment.

Procedure

Dyadic social interactions were arranged to investigate the process of
the behavioral confirmation of stereotypes. Mixed-sex dyads of previously
unacquainted subjects were formed, and one of the dyad members was
randomly designated as the perceiver and the other as the target. For one
half of the dyads, the perceiver was a man and the target was a woman;
for the other half of the dyads, the perceiver was a woman and the target
was a man. The experiment was conducted in three experimental cubicles
located in three adjoining corridors. To prevent subjects from meeting
each other before their conversation, subjects were individually escorted
to cubicles in separate corridors. They were asked to read research de-
scriptions, which informed them that the study concerned the acquaintance
process. They were then administered a biographical questionnaire (which
was later exchanged with the partner’s) that asked questions about courses,
hobbies, and activities. The information on this questionnaire provided
the basis for the subjects’ 10-min getting-acquainted conversation.

Subjects’ beliefs about the psychological background of targets were
manipulated when the biographical questionnaires were exchanged. In the
control condition, the nonclient condition, the perceiver was led to believe
that the target was recruited from an introductory psychology section (which
was true). In the experimental condition, the client condition, the exper-
imenter mentioned that he worked at the University Counseling Center
and that he had recruited the target from students “who were experiencing
some psychological problems and were going to the University Counseling
Center for psychological therapy.”

From this point on, the procedures were the same as those used by
Snyder et al. (1977). After the biographical questionnaires were ex-
changed, but before the conversation began, perceivers rated their first
impressions of the target on the Impression Formation Questionnaire (IFQ),
which was originally developed by Dion, Bersheid, and Walster (1972)
and later modified by Snyder et al. (1977) in their investigation of inter-
personal attraction. The IFQ consists of thirty-four 6-point bipolar scales
such as sociable-insociable, sensitive-insensitive, shy-bold, and friendly-
unfriendly). We added four items that have been shown to relate to attitudes
toward the mentally ill (Crompton et al., 1967; Nummally, 1961). These
items were unpredictable-predictable, cruel-kind, cold-warm, and insin-
cere—sincere. As in Snyder et al. (1977), while perceivers rated their initial
impressions of targets, targets rated themselves on the IFQ.

After completing the IQF, subjects, using microphones and headphones,
engaged in a 10-min getting-acquainted conversation from their cubicles.
The conversations were recorded (with subjects’ permission) on separate
tracks of a Sony TC-350 stereophonic tape recorder, which was situated
in a cubicle in the middle corridor. After the conversation, targets were
administered the Conversation Assessment Questionnaire. This question-
naire contained six 10-point items regarding how comfortable targets felt
during the conversation, how much they enjoyed the conversation, how
accurately they believed they had been perceived, how typical was their
partners’ behavior compared to the way they are usually treated by the
opposite sex, how they believed that their partners would rate their inter-
personal skills, and how they believed that their partners would assess
their psychological adjustment. At the conclusion of the experiment, all
of the subjects were thoroughly debriefed. The true nature of the experi-
ment and the reason for the misinformation were explained.

Two raters, one man and one woman, later independently evaluated
how perceivers and targets interacted. The raters, who were unaware of
the experimental conditions, listened first to the targets’ statements, which
were recorded on one track of the tape recording. After hearing each
target’s segment, the raters assessed the target’s behavior by completing
the IFQ and a 16-item Judge’s Evaluation Questionnaire that included
questions such as how comfortable the person sounded, how much the
subject liked the person with whom he or she was interacting, and how
favorable was the subject’s personality. After all of the target segments
were rated, the judges listened to the audio tracks containing the perceiv-
ers’ segments of the conversations and assessed how each perceiver acted
toward his or her target partner.

Interrater reliability was determined separately for target and perceiver
segments in the same manner as that used by Snyder et al. (1977). Intra-
class correlation coefficients between judges’ ratings were computed for
all dependent measures. The median reliability coefficient for the judges’
target ratings was .71; the median reliability coefficient for the ratings
of the perceivers behavior was .69. These reliability coefficients are com-
parable to those obtained in previous research with these instruments.
Snyder et al. (1977) had a median reliability coefficient of .76 for targets
and .61 for perceivers. The mean of the judges’ ratings for each item was
used in subsequent analyses.

To assess the social desirability of each item on the IFQ, an independent
sample of students (n = 36) was asked to select which end of each bipolar
item represented the more socially valued characteristic. These data were
used to evaluate the relative favorability of impressions across experi-
mental conditions.

Results

The impact of the manipulation concerning whether the target
was a counseling center client was assessed at several points dur-
ing the experiment. As in Snyder et al.’s (1977) work that charted
the processes involved in the behavioral confirmation of stereo-
types, the data analysis assessed (a) perceivers’ initial impressions

1Due to a mechanical problem with the tape recorder, only 44 of the
perceivers’ portions of the conversation could be analyzed by the judges.
Therefore, all statistical analyses for perceivers’ portions of the conver-
sation were based on N = 45.
of targets, (b) perceivers’ behaviors during the conversation, (c) targets’ impressions of the conversation, and (d) targets’ behaviors during the conversation.

Perceivers’ Initial Impressions

Because the IFQ, which was originally developed by Dion et al. (1972), was modified by Snyder et al. (1977) and then again in the present research, factor analysis of perceivers’ first impressions of their partners (i.e., before the getting-acquainted session but after the experimental manipulation) was used to determine the number of dimensions of social attractiveness that are represented in this instrument. The correlation matrix was analyzed via principal factoring with iteration and rotated to a varimax solution. Five factors emerged (eigenvalues > 1.00). The first factor contained items related to Openness (e.g., shy–bold, reserved–outgoing, defensive–open). The second factor, which was identified as a Security dimension, contained such items as self-assertive–submissive, poised–awkward, and secure–insecure. The third factor was Character. Examples of items loading on this factor are cruel–kind, vain–modest, untrustworthy–trustworthy. The fourth factor, labeled Sociability, contained such items as naive–sophisticated, unconventional–conventional, and happy–sad. The final factor contained items (e.g., unintelligent–intelligent, unsuccessful–successful) pertaining to Competence.2

Two-way (Condition × Target–Perceiver Sex) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAS) were performed separately for items that loaded on each of these factors. Statistically significant main effects (ps < .05) for client condition were obtained for each of the five analyses. The results of these MANOVAS and of the univariate analyses (ANOVAS) involving the items within each factor are presented in Table 1. Although the actual adjective pairs on the IFQ varied in terms of whether a high or a low rating indicated a socially desirable characteristic, the items in Table 1 are adjusted for presentation purposes. On the basis of the responses of the sample of subjects who evaluated the social desirability of the bipolar items, the more socially desirable item is listed second in the pair.

As predicted, perceivers formed more negative impressions of target partners who they believed to be seeking psychological therapy (clients) than they did of targets who were believed to be introductory psychology students (nonclients). For example, on the Openness dimension perceivers rated clients as relatively reserved, unenthusiastic, and defensive. Subjects believed that on the Security dimension, clients were more boring, awkward, and insecure than were nonclients. Client targets, compared to nonclient targets, were also perceived as having a Character that was more egocentric, cruel, and cold. Perceivers who believed that targets were clients perceived them along the Sociability dimension as being relatively unsociable, unconventional, and sad. Furthermore, with respect to Competence, clients were rated as more unsuccessful than were nonclients.

A multivariate main effect for sex was obtained only for the Security factor, F(10, 57) = 2.10, p < .05. Univariate analyses for the items on this dimension yielded a significant effect only for independent–dependent, F(1, 66) = 7.57, p < .01. Male targets (who were rated by female perceivers) were evaluated as more independent than were female targets (who were rated by male perceivers). There were no statistically significant multivariate interactions between condition and sex.

Perceivers’ Behaviors During the Conversation

To assess whether perceivers’ initial impressions of their partners related to how subjects behaved toward targets during the conversation, judges’ ratings of the perceivers’ behaviors were analyzed. As can be seen in Table 1, the MANOVAS of each of the IFQ factors revealed significant (p < .05) main effects for client condition on all five dimensions. Univariate analyses revealed, as predicted, that subjects behaved in a more negative manner toward clients than toward nonclients. Judges heard perceivers behave toward client targets in a more unenthusiastic, insensitive, artificial, cruel, and unsociable manner during the getting-acquainted conversation as compared to the way perceivers interacted with nonclient targets.

A significant multivariate main effect for sex was obtained only for the Security factor, F(10, 34) = 2.27, p < .04. Two items showed univariate main effects for sex: independent–dependent, F(1, 40) = 7.03, p = .01; and unattractive–attractive, F(1, 40) = 4.35, p = .04. Male perceivers behaved in a more independent manner toward female targets than did female perceivers toward male targets; male perceivers also interacted in a more attractive way than did female perceivers. There were no statistically significant Condition × Sex interactions obtained in the MANOVA.

A MANOVA of the Judges’ Evaluation Questionnaire, which also concerned judges’ ratings of perceivers’ behaviors, demonstrated a main effect for client condition, F(16, 26) = 2.45, p = .02. Univariate analyses of variance yielded significant main effects on 13 of the 16 items (see Table 2). Consistent with analyses of judges’ ratings on the IFQ, judges rated perceivers interacting with client targets as behaving in a less socially desirable manner (e.g., less pleasant, secure, and interested) as compared to perceivers conversing with nonclient targets.

Targets’ Impressions of the Conversation

A MANOVA was performed on targets’ responses on the Conversation Assessment Questionnaire, which concerned targets’ views of the getting-acquainted conversation. A marginally significant main effect for condition was obtained, F(6, 61) = 2.09, p = .06. Univariate analyses revealed that targets who were believed to be clients, compared to targets in the nonclient condition, were less comfortable (Ms = 6.41 vs. 7.50) F(1, 64) = 7.96, p < .01, and enjoyed the conversation less (Ms = 7.14 vs. 7.97) F(1, 64) = 4.39, p < .05. In addition, targets in the client condition reported that they believed that they were perceived less accurately by their partners (Ms = 5.32 vs. 6.55) F(1, 64) = 9.52, p < .01, and were treated less typically (Ms = 6.91 vs. 7.58) F(1, 64) = 3.92, p < .05, than did targets in the nonclient condition. There were no statistically significant multivariate or univariate effects associated with the main effect for sex or the Sex × Condition interaction.

2 Other research concerning impressions of people with psychological problems that used the Impression Formation Questionnaire replicated this factor structure (Dovidio, Fishbane, & Sibicky, 1985).
During the Conversation
Multivariate and Univariate Results for Perceivers’ Impressions Before the Conversation and for Perceivers’ and Targets’ Behaviors During the Conversation

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor and item</th>
<th>Impressions’</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Targets’ behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1: Openness</td>
<td>3.12*</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>3.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring-interesting</td>
<td>1.91 .172</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy-bold</td>
<td>4.92 .030</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserved-outgoing</td>
<td>9.39 .003</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious-humorous</td>
<td>0.01 .916</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>.613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unenthusiastic–enthusiastic</td>
<td>7.17 .009</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive-open</td>
<td>10.05 .002</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2: Security</td>
<td>3.79*</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>2.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak–strong</td>
<td>3.35 .072</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually cold–sexually warm</td>
<td>2.49 .119</td>
<td>8.55</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submissive–self-assertive</td>
<td>2.57 .114</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>.528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring–interesting</td>
<td>1.91 .172</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull–exciting</td>
<td>4.30 .042</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent–independent</td>
<td>3.45 .068</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually prohibitive–permissive</td>
<td>0.40 .527</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkward–poised</td>
<td>20.54 .001</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically unattractive–attractive</td>
<td>4.21 .044</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure–secure</td>
<td>32.74 .001</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3: Character</td>
<td>2.05*</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>2.77*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insensitive–sensitive</td>
<td>1.25 .267</td>
<td>20.06</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egotistic–altruistic</td>
<td>4.66 .035</td>
<td>10.98</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cruel–kind</td>
<td>4.08 .047</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial–genuine</td>
<td>0.61 .437</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vain–modest</td>
<td>0.23 .633</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insincere–sincere</td>
<td>0.77 .382</td>
<td>15.31</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold–warm</td>
<td>11.84 .001</td>
<td>9.83</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untrustworthy–trustworthy</td>
<td>2.75 .102</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 4: Sociability</td>
<td>5.25*</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>3.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple–complex</td>
<td>0.69 .409</td>
<td>14.43</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsociable–sociable</td>
<td>10.47 .002</td>
<td>13.70</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naive–sophisticated</td>
<td>1.38 .244</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkward–poised</td>
<td>20.54 .001</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconventional–conventional</td>
<td>6.34 .014</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad–happy</td>
<td>19.88 .001</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure–secure</td>
<td>32.74 .001</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 5: Competence</td>
<td>2.82*</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>4.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naive–sophisticated</td>
<td>1.38 .244</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional–rational</td>
<td>0.35 .553</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintelligent–intelligent</td>
<td>1.40 .241</td>
<td>11.34</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful–successful</td>
<td>11.76 .001</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates a multivariate result.

Targets’ Behaviors During the Conversation

To evaluate the extent to which targets’ behaviors were affected by perceivers’ perceptions and subsequent behaviors, ratings of targets’ behaviors during the conversation were also analyzed using MANOVAS. Again, each of the five dimensions of the IFQ had a significant multivariate main effect for client condition. Table 1 presents the results of the MANOVAS and the ANOVAS performed on the items that loaded on each factor.

As predicted, judges heard systematic differences between the behavioral style of targets believed by perceivers to be clients and of targets who were not believed to be clients. In particular, client targets came to behave in ways that confirmed perceivers’ initial, negative impression. On the basis of the judges’ ratings, clients showed less Openness (i.e., they were less interesting, bold, outgoing, humorous, enthusiastic, and open) and less Security (i.e., they behaved in a less strong, sexually warm, sexually permissive, exciting, poised, attractive, and secure manner) than did non-clients. On the Character dimension, judges rated clients as relatively insensitive, egotistic, insincere, and cold; on Sociability, judges evaluated them as relatively naive, awkward, sad, insecure, simple, and unsociable; and on Competence, judges rated clients as relatively unsuccessful and unintelligent compared to non-clients. A multivariate main effect for sex was revealed only for Security, F(10, 57) = 3.16, p = .003. The only significant univariate main effect for items related to this factor was for the strong–weak item, F(1, 66) = 5.39, p < .03. Judges rated male targets as stronger than female targets. No Condition × Sex multivariate interactions were obtained.

A MANOVA of the Judges’ Evaluation Questionnaire, which
Note. Higher mean ratings are more favorable.

* p < .05  ** p < .001.

also concerned judges' ratings of targets' behaviors, demonstrated a main effect for client condition, $F(16, 57) = 2.37, p < .01$. As presented in Table 2, \textit{ANOVA} \textit{S} yielded significant main effects on all 16 items. Consistent with the analyses of judges' ratings on the IFQ, judges perceived that client targets came to behave in a less socially desirable manner (e.g., less confident, attractive, and likable) than did nonclient targets. Unexpectedly, judges viewed client targets as less nervous, $F(1, 64) = 5.57, p = .03$. In general, though, client targets behaved in less socially desirable ways than did nonclient targets.

### Discussion

An important factor in the decision to seek professional psychological aid is anticipated negative evaluation and stigma (Wills, 1983). It has been suggested that because of this fear of being perceived negatively by others, many people who would benefit from professional assistance do not seek it (Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health, 1961; Wills, 1983). Even people who do seek professional assistance often do so at unnecessary personal expense in order to avoid social stigmatization; they forego mental health care benefits provided by their employers and pay for psychotherapy with their own funds rather than risk disclosure at their workplace (Sobel, 1981). Our results indicate that this fear of stigmatization may be realistic. Specifically, prior to interacting with their partners (who were randomly assigned to conditions), perceivers formed more negative impressions when they believed that their partners were seeking psychological therapy than when no mention was made of therapy. Clients, for example, were described as more defensive, awkward, insecure, sad, cold, and unsociable. Thus, our work suggests that the stigma associated with being institutionalized for mental illness also extends to seeking therapy for "psychological problems." What future research in this area might consider further are social reactions toward people with various types of psychological problems who seek different types of psychological treatment.

Although the results supported our hypothesis that describing a person as seeking psychological therapy leads others to perceive that individual in relatively negative ways, they are somewhat inconsistent with the conclusions of Crocetti, Spiro, and Siassi (1974) about the public's increasingly tolerant attitudes concerning mental illness. In particular, Crocetti et al. concluded from social-distance surveys that the mentally ill need not fear rejection in everyday social interactions and in fact "enjoy nearly total acceptance in all but the most intimate relationships" (p. 88). The nature of the situation in which attitudes are sampled, however, appears to be a significant factor in how accepting or rejecting people are toward persons with psychological problems. Whatley (1959) concluded that attitudes toward mental patients are more positive in impersonal situations than in situations of some consequence to interactants. In addition, Piner and Kahle (1984) recently found that subjects showed less bias against a mental patient in an adaptively unimportant situation than in a personally involving situation. Because subjects in the present study were anticipating interacting with client partners, they were probably more negative in their responses than they would have been if they were rating a hypothetical, "typical" counseling center client (a method more comparable to that used by Crocetti et al.). The fact that negative responses toward clients were elicited in our experimental situation in which subjects knew that they were in an experiment, knew that it would be a brief conversation, and did not meet their conversational partner face-to-face suggests that the stigmatizing effect of psychotherapy may be so powerful that it invades even relatively inconsequential interactions.

The present research not only extends previous research on attitudes toward people with mental illness to another domain, attitudes toward people participating in psychological therapy, but also demonstrates that these attitudes are manifested in behavior. There have been relatively few studies concerned with actual behavior toward the mentally ill (Farina, Holland, & Ring, 1966; Gergen & Jones, 1963), and the studies involving responses to counseling clients have exclusively used paper and pencil measures (Goodyear & Parish, 1978; Parish & Kappes, 1979; Phillips, 1963). As Piner and Kahle (1984) cautioned, "researchers cannot
infer that negative attitudes automatically lead to negative behaviors'' (p. 806). We found that perceivers' perceptions and expectations systematically influenced perceivers' interaction styles. Perceivers who interacted with counseling center clients behaved in a less favorable (e.g., less enthusiastic, sensitive, sociable, and likable) manner than did those who conversed with nonclients. Furthermore, consistent with previous research on the self-fulfilling prophecy, perceivers' perceptions of targets influenced dyadic social interactions in ways that led to their behavioral confirmation. Even though target subjects were randomly assigned to conditions, clients actually came to behave in a less socially desirable manner than did nonclients: They were less poised, less attractive, less effective, and less successful. Thus, not only did the present experiment replicate and extend research on the self-fulfilling prophecy in general, but more specifically, it directly tested and verified the fundamental interpersonal processes posited by labeling theory.

Although the present research did not examine the extent to which targets internalized perceivers' false impressions, other work suggests that the effects of the processes involved in stigmatization and the self-fulfilling prophecy can be relatively enduring. Jones et al. (1984) proposed that stigmatization significantly alters social processes and interpersonal relationships that contribute to the development of one's self-concept and self-schemas (Markus, 1977). Self-schemas allow individuals to attend to certain aspects of their own behavior and to disregard others, and thus importantly influence how people process information about the self and how people respond across situations. In addition, the results of a study of expectations of hostile behavior and the self-fulfilling prophecy by Snyder and Swann (1978) demonstrate the perseverance of the effects of perceivers' initial impressions in targets' subsequent behavior. In particular, targets who interacted with perceivers who expected hostile partners came to behave in relatively hostile ways. Furthermore, targets who were led to make dispositional attributions for their hostile actions displayed relatively high levels of hostility in later interactions with other subjects. Therefore, it is quite possible that a person who is stigmatized for seeking psychological therapy may internalize people's negative stereotypes and may manifest these characteristics in their behavior, thereby confirming the stereotypes that a new population of perceivers may hold.

In practical terms, the present findings suggest that the fear of rejection that makes many people reluctant to seek psychological therapy appears to be justified; negative stereotypes about people who seek counseling do exist. More important, many of the benefits and gains acquired by clients through the therapeutic process may be jeopardized by these stereotypes. In essence, it is quite possible that actual clients may fall victim to interpersonal processes in which they inadvertently come to confirm the negative preconceptions of others in a way that can undermine progress made in therapy. Because the relatively simple cognitive schemas that people have of stigmatized groups contribute to bias (Linville, 1981), future research may also consider the effects that strategies aimed at producing more differentiated processing have on bias toward psychotherapy clients. For example, Langer, Bashner, and Chanowitz (1985) found that teaching children to be more differentiated (mindful) in their processing reduced their discrimination toward handicapped people. Perhaps, fostering more differentiated thinking about clients would help to eliminate the stigma of psychological therapy.

References


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