

## 5<sup>th</sup> International Colloquium of Schizophrenia of Oporto 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2008

# Stigmatization of people with mental illnesses: a preliminary study of university students' opinions.

Palha, F., Guimarães, A., Castro-Henriques, M., Costa, N. & Campos, L.

*"Stigmatization and discrimination are among the key obstacles to care. Around the world people do not seek, obtain or follow treatment because of fear, deficient resources or lack of information. They are commonly victimized for their illness and become targets for human rights abuses and discrimination. Stigmatization and discrimination are key factors that impede people from obtaining the help they need."*

(World Health Organization, FIFTY-FIFTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY 55/18, Provisional agenda item 13.13 11 April 2002)

## Introduction

Stigmatization and discrimination of people with mental disorders remain a hard problem to overcome across the world, placing several difficulties for people directly affected by this experience – as service users, carers or professionals. As part of the huge impact this fact has in their lives, many people admitted fear of disclosing their condition, even to family and friends." (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004, p. 4), and studies have shown that fewer than four in ten employers say they would recruit someone with a mental health problem (Manning & White, 1995).

In this way, in the 2001 World Health Organization mental health annual report, "New Understanding, New Hope", we can read that from all barriers we have to overcome in the community, the most important is stigmatization and discrimination associated towards people suffering from mental and behavioural diseases.

This reality led to the development of several studies and anti-stigma campaigns all over the world, even though so far the impact of these efforts have not achieved their goals. As an example, the survey carried out by the Royal College of Psychiatry in England 5 years after their "Changing Minds" campaign showed that negative opinions about people with mental illness are still widely held (Crisp, Gelder, Goddard & Meltzer, 2005).

In Portugal, to our knowledge, we have never had any consistent and continuous anti-stigma campaign, or even a study of the public opinion about people with mental disorders. As part of the commitments of ENCONTRAR+SE, a NGO that advocates for better mental health services in Portugal, an anti-stigma campaign was launched in October 2006. This survey was carried out before the beginning of this campaign, and served two purposes: as a baseline for subsequent study of its effects; and to understand the opinions of a group identified as particularly vulnerable (students) in order to assess their needs for future interventions.

## Method

### Participants

100 undergraduate students were randomly selected from the baseline assessment of a total of 297. Within this sample, participants are grouped into 5 groups of 20 according to their major field of study: law, arts, economics, health and psychology). This sample is composed by 54 women and 46 men. Women are aged between 18 and 25 (mean=21.17), men are aged between 18 and 26 (mean=21.28).

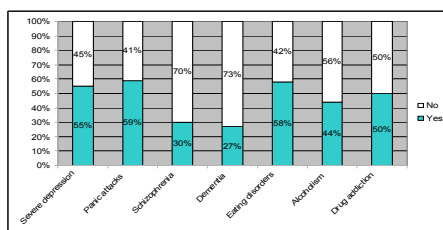
### Measures

In order to access attitudes towards mental disorders we used the translated version of the questionnaire used in the ONS Omnibus Survey – Attitudes to Mental Illness (Crisp, Gelder, Goddard & Meltzer, 2005), for which we obtained authors' authorization. Interviewers asked whether respondents knew anyone with any of these seven psychiatric disorders: severe depression, panic attacks or phobias, schizophrenia, dementia (e.g., Alzheimer's disease), eating disorder (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa), alcoholism, and drug addiction, starting by asking whether respondents knew anyone with any of the seven disorders. Respondents were then asked how far each of eight statements applied to people with each of the seven disorders. The statements were: dangerous to others, unpredictable, hard to talk with, feel different from the way we feel at times, have only themselves to blame for their condition, could pull themselves together if they wanted, would not improve if given treatment, will never recover fully. For each item, respondents were asked to choose a point on a five point likert scale, the extremes of which bore anchoring statements: for example dangerous to others – not dangerous to others.

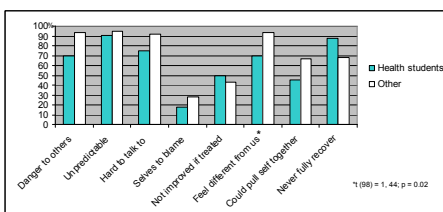
### Statistical Analysis

After a brief descriptive presentation of the results, we focused only on responses about schizophrenia. We then divided the scores into two groups, the first including answers ranging from 1-3 which are considered "negative opinions", and a second group with answers 4 and 5, which are considered "positive opinions". We also grouped the students in two broad groups, the first including "health" students (health and psychology), and a second one with students from "other" fields (law, economics and arts). An independent t-student analysis was carried out to assess if differences between these two groups were significant.

## Results



Graph 1. Do you know anyone with...



Graph 2. Comparison between % of negative opinions of "health" students and "other" students in regard to schizophrenia

Opinion	Type of mental illness						
	Severe depression	Panic attacks	Dementia	Eating disorder	Alcoholism	Drug addiction	Schizophrenia
Danger to others	54	49	63,6	31	92	92	84
Unpredictable	76	76	78,6	46	77	81	93
Hard to talk to	81	58	82,8	75	81	81	85
Selves to blame	40	36	21,1	70	84	80	24
Not improved if treated	10	28,3	54,5	11	14	18	46
Feel different from us	80	71	74,7	82	76	76	84
Could pull self together	86	77	53,5	83,8	86	80	58
Never fully recover	22	35	83,8	17	24	28	76

Table 1. Percentages agreeing with negative statements.

## Conclusions

46% of respondents said they know someone with mental illness. The disease mostly known by students is "Panic Attacks" (59%), "Eating Disorders" (58%) and "Severe Depression" (55%), being "Dementia" (27%) and "Schizophrenia" (30%) the ones less familiar to them.

Regarding students opinions about people with mental illness, the most evident result refers to the association between perceived "danger to others" associated with "Alcoholism" (92%), "Drug Addiction" (92%) and "Schizophrenia" (84%). This findings is similar to results of other studies which have highlighted the perceived close link made between dangerousness and schizophrenia (Francis, Pirkis, Dunt & Blood, 2001; Thornicroft, 2006), which has become the target of many anti-stigma initiatives. Common stereotypes about people with mental illness seem to parallel those with drug dependence and include dangerousness and blame (Angermeyer, Matschinger, & Corrigan, 2004; Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, & Pescosolido, 1999). Generally, research shows that psychiatric disorders are viewed as more blameworthy than physical health conditions such as cancer and heart disease (Corrigan et al., 1999; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988).

Furthermore, the item that obtained more consensus refers to the "unpredictability" associated with the diagnosis of "schizophrenia". When comparing "health" students with students from "other" subjects, it is interesting to notice that the first group presents more negative opinions about people with schizophrenia in all items but those of "never fully recover" and "not improve with treatment". This difference is statistically significant in what refers "feels different from us".

## References

- Angermeyer, M. C., Matschinger, H., & Corrigan, P. W. (2004). Familiarity with mental illness and social distance from people with schizophrenia and major depression: Testing a model using data from a representative population survey. *Schizophrenia Research*, 69, 175-182.
- Manning, C. & White, P. D. (1995). Attitudes of employers to the mentally ill. *Psychiatric Bulletin*, 19, 541-543.
- Social Exclusion Unit (2004). *Mental health and social exclusion*. Social Exclusion Unit Report Summary. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- WHO (2001). *Relatório sobre a saúde no mundo. Saúde Mental: Nova Concepção, Nova Esperança*. Geneva: WHO (Document in Portuguese).
- Crisp, A., Gelder, M., Goddard, E. & Meltzer, H. (2005). *Stigmatization of people with mental illnesses: a follow-up study within the changing minds campaign of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*. Research Report.
- Thornicroft, G. (2006). *Actions speak louder... Tackling discrimination against people with mental illness*. Oxford University: Mental Health Foundation

