

Original article

Media consumption and desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia

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Abstract

There is ample evidence for a distorted presentation of the mentally ill in the media. However, only little is known about its impact on attitudes towards people with mental disorders. Therefore, we investigated the relationship between watching TV and reading the newspaper on the one hand, and the desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia on the other. In 2001, a representative population survey was conducted in Germany, using a fully structured personal interview. We found that the desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia increases almost continuously with the amount of TV consumption. The association between reading the newspaper and social distance is less pronounced and depends on the type of newspaper people read. Since, obviously, there is a relationship between media consumption and attitudes towards people with schizophrenia, inaccurate and one-sided messages about mental disorders should be replaced by accurate and more balanced messages.

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1. Introduction

There has been a growing interest in recent years in the connection between the imagery of people with mental disorders, the media and stigmatization. The majority of studies undertaken in this field have given ample evidence for a distorted presentation of mentally ill people in *newspapers* [1,3,5,9,10,14,16,21,23–27,31,32,38–40], and *television and film* [6–8,11,12,18,28–30,33,41–43]. The effects of a constant exposure of the recipients to a one-sided and biased media coverage largely presenting negative and inaccurate pictures of people with mental disorders, promoting stereotypes, particularly by linking mental disorder and violence—of which evidence has been given in the above studies—have been the subject of two quasi-experimental population studies. Angermeyer and Matschinger [2] and Appleby and Wessely [4] provide evidence that selective reporting following the violent attacks against prominent German politicians by two individuals suffering from schizophrenia and the Hungerford massacre in Great Britain had an

impact on the attitudes of the public, leading to an increase in the number of people believing that the mentally ill are dangerous and likely to commit horrific crimes. In their social psychological experiments, Wahl and Lefkowitz [37] and Thornton and Wahl [36] investigated the impact of a television film and newspaper article, respectively, on attitudes towards mental illness. Both studies support concerns that negative media reports contribute to negative attitudes towards people with mental illnesses and add to mental illness stigma.

Granello and Pauley [13], studying the relationship between students' television viewing habits and their tolerance towards people with mental illness, found that the number of hours of television watched per week was significantly and positively related to intolerance, i.e. there is a relationship between the quantity of TV consumption and negative attitudes towards people with mental disorders. Since participants in this study were restricted to students, this present study aims at investigating the relationship between media consumption and desired social distance towards mentally ill people using a representative population sample. As an example will serve the social distance desired towards people with schizophrenia. Based on the findings of the above study, the hypothesis to be tested is: The more people watch TV, the

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more they will reject people with schizophrenia. In addition, we will also test a second hypothesis: People who read newspapers tend to reject people with schizophrenia more than those who do not read newspapers.

2. Subjects and methods

2.1. Sample

During May and June of 2001, a representative survey on public beliefs about mental disorders and attitudes towards the mentally ill was conducted in Germany, involving German citizens aged 18 years and older, living in non-institutional settings. The sample was drawn using a three-stage random sampling procedure with electoral wards (sample points) at the first stage, households at the second and individuals within the target households at the third stage. Target households within the sample points were determined using the random route procedure, target persons were selected according to random digits. Informed consent was considered to have been given when individuals agreed to complete the interview. In total, 5025 personal interviews were conducted, reflecting a response rate of 65.1%. The field work was carried out by Berlin based USUMA. In Table 1, the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are reported together with data from the Official Registry Report for 2000. As can be seen, the sample was largely comparable to the whole of the German population aged 18 years and older.

2.2. Interview

A fully structured personal interview was conducted. Apart from other topics, it also included questions inquiring into respondents' media consumption. In addition, a scale for measuring respondents' preference for social distance towards people with schizophrenia was part of the interview.

Media consumption. The respondents were asked how many days per week they watched TV. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate the channels they were tuning in most frequently. Finally, we wanted to know whether they were regular readers of a newspaper and if so, which newspapers or magazines they read. The subjects' responses were noted down by the interviewer and coded. The TV stations were subsumed under the following categories: public service stations, local stations, foreign channels, private stations and pay-TV. The daily newspapers were categorized as tabloid newspapers, broadsheets, regional newspapers and others.

Desire for social distance. Preferences for social distance served as proxy for behavioral intentions to distance oneself from people with schizophrenia. These were measured by responses to the seven items of the Social Distance Scale developed by Link et al. [19]. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they would accept someone with schizophrenia in the following social relationships: tenant, co-worker, member of the same social circle, recommend as prospective

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the population samples

	Survey 2001	Total population ^a 2000
	%	%
Gender		
Male	43.8	48.3
Female	56.2	51.7
Age in years		
18–24	10.5	9.4
25–34	17.4	16.7
35–44	21.0	19.5
45–54	15.6	15.3
54–64	17.3	15.2
65+	18.1	19.6
Educational attainment		
Pupil	0.3 ^b	0.2 ^c
no school completed	3.8 ^b	2.1 ^c
Hauptschule (9 years of school completed)	45.2 ^b	49.1 ^c
Realschule/POS (10 years of school completed)	32.5 ^b	27.5 ^c
Fachhochschulreife/Abitur (technical college of higher education/A-levels)	18.1 ^b	21.1 ^c
Marital status		
Married	55.2	56.5
Divorced	8.9	7.5
Widowed	11.0	9.2
Single	24.8	26.8

There was no information available for persons aged 18–20 years.

^a Data from the Federal Statistical Office (12/2001) for the population aged 18 years and older.

^b For comparison: the data for the population aged 20 years and older from the survey.

^c Data from the Federal Statistical Office for the population aged 20 years and older.

employee, in-law, childcare provider. Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “in any case” to “in no case at all”, the respondents could indicate to what extent they would be willing to accept someone with schizophrenia in a given relationship. In previous studies, Link et al.'s [20] Social Distance Scale has shown excellent internal-consistency reliability (e.g. 2). Evidence for the validity of the scale is available mainly with regard to construct validity.

3. Results

As shown in Table 2, the desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia increases almost continuously with the amount of TV consumption. The difference between respondents who never watch TV and those who watch 5 days/week or more is quite substantial. It amounts to around five points on the sum scale measuring social distance, which, in total, comprises 28 points. Multiple regression analysis reveals that there is a significant association between TV consumption and the desire for social distance (Table 4). Additional analyses indicate that it is the sheer quantity of TV exposure, since no differential effect of the type of TV sta-

Table 2
TV consumption per week and desire for social distance toward people with schizophrenia

TV consumption		Social distance	
days/week	N	\bar{x}	S.D.
0	61	15.0	7.5
1	60	15.2	5.7
2	153	17.4	6.9
3	305	18.1	6.2
4	437	19.1	6.6
5	665	19.9	6.2
6	790	20.1	6.4
7	2493	19.6	6.2
Total	4964	19.4	6.4

tion tuned in could be observed. However, when in a second step, the major socio-demographic characteristics and familiarity with mental illness are introduced into the regression equation, the regression coefficient for TV consumption drops by half.

Table 3
Reading newspapers and desire for social distance toward people with schizophrenia

Reading newspapers	n	Social distance	
		\bar{x}	S.D.
No newspaper	1494	18.8	6.6
Any newspaper	3458	19.7	6.2
Broadsheets	117	17.7	6.2
Regional newspapers	2354	20.0	6.2
Tabloids	331	20.0	6.2
Broadsheets and regional newspapers	96	17.6	6.7
Broadsheets and tabloids	29	18.5	4.5
Regional newspapers and tabloids	303	18.6	6.1
Broadsheets and regional newspapers and tabloids	12	17.0	5.7
Unspecified newspapers	236	18.8	6.3
Total	4972	19.4	6.4

Table 4
Regression of the desire for social distance toward people with schizophrenia on socio-demographic characteristics, familiarity with mental illness and media consumption

	Model 1 Beta ^a	Model 2 Beta ^a
TV consumption (days/week)	0.369***	0.184***
Tabloids and regional newspapers ^b	0.865***	0.406*
Broadsheets (alone or in combination with other papers) ^b	−0.888*	−0.445
Gender (female)		−0.123
Age		0.029***
Educational level: low ^c		−0.049
Educational level: medium ^c		0.532**
Educational level: high ^c		−0.951***
Separated ^d		−0.707
Widowed ^d		−0.135
Divorced ^d		−0.240
Single ^d		−0.273
Familiarity with mental illness		−2.283***
R ²	0.018	0.062

Test between broadsheets and tabloids/regional newspapers: $F_{(2,4885)} = 3.41$; $P = 0.033$; * $P < 0.05$ ** $P < 0.01$ *** $P < 0.001$.

^a Unstandardized regression coefficients.

^b Reference category: no newspaper.

^c Reference category: educational level very low.

^d Reference category: married.

Conversely, reading a newspaper has no influence per se on the desire for social distance (Table 3). Rather, it is the type of newspaper people read that matters here. Multiple regression analysis reveals that regular readers of tabloids and regional newspapers express a higher preference for social distance towards people with schizophrenia than respondents who regularly read broadsheets (alone or in combination with either tabloids or regional newspapers or in combination with both) and those who do not read any newspaper at all. Readers of broadsheets distance themselves only slightly less from people with schizophrenia than respondents who do not read any newspaper. As with TV consumption, when the major socio-demographic characteristics are added, the regression coefficients drop by half and only the regression coefficient for tabloids and regional newspapers remains statistically significant (Table 4).

4. Discussion

The first hypothesis on which we have based our investigation, namely the more people watch TV, the more they will reject people with schizophrenia, is supported by our results. Similar to Granello and Pauley [13], we found a positive correlation between TV consumption and negative attitudes. By contrast, no such general association can be found for reading newspapers. However, a distinction has to be drawn here: The desire for social distance with newspaper readers clearly depends on the type of the newspaper.

There are several possible explanations why the association between TV consumption and the desire for social distance is more pronounced than for reading the newspaper. First, a German study by Hilicki [15] found that when the same content is presented, pictures have a stronger effect than the written word. Furthermore, Tannenbaum [35] has established proof of a biologically conditioned increased attention for the moving image. Second, in a comparative investigation of viewing, listening and reading, Sturm et al. [34] found that TV messages are more strongly targeted at recipients' emotions than newspaper reports, and emotional elements of a message are better remembered than rational elements. Thus, while the positive or negative impression of a person depicted in the media is remembered, the arguments why this person is to be valued as being positive or negative are forgotten. The latter argument can also be consulted for explaining why respondents who are regular readers of tabloids or regional newspapers express a greater preference for social distance than those who do not read any newspaper at all or readers of broadsheets. Like TV messages, tabloid messages aim at communicating emotions by extensively using large-format photos (which have a stronger effect than text) and eye-catching headlines. While broadsheet newspapers generally aim to be more factual and objective in the way they cover the news, tabloids neglect background information for the benefit of focussing on spectacular and sensational details [22].

Our study has a number of limitations which should not remain unmentioned. First, since the study is cross-sectional in nature, it does not permit to draw causal inferences. We are unable to decide whether media consumption leads to more negative attitudes or whether people with negative attitudes tend to consume the media more frequently. We simply can state that there is an association between the two. Second, media consumption could only explain 2% of the variance of social distance (and after controlling for confounding variables even less). Obviously, there are many other factors impacting on public attitudes towards people with schizophrenia. Interestingly, familiarity with mental illness proved to have a much stronger effect in the opposite direction. Third, the sample size of 4899 respondents results in a very high statistical power. Even very small effect sizes, like $F^2 = 0.02$ and $\alpha = 0.05$, would yield a power of virtually 1 for post hoc comparison, taking into account the 14 predictors in our regression equation. Fourth, the label schizophrenia, which we used as an explicit stimulus, may not have been

well understood by some of the respondents [17]. Fifth, the study investigated the correlation between social distance and schizophrenia. Thus, no general remarks can be made as to the effects on social distance towards other mental disorders.

5. Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the representation of schizophrenia in particular (and mental disorders in general) in TV and tabloid newspaper reports should be the main target of anti-stigma interventions. For change to occur, inaccurate and unfavorable messages should be 'replaced' by accurate and positive messages. Stories of people living with mental disorders should become commonplace in media reports. Thornton and Wahl [36], for instance, found that the influence of newspaper articles on respondents' attitudes towards mental disorder was more positive when study participants had received accurate supplementary information, thus indicating that change in the mass media's depictions can produce change in public perceptions of people with mental disorders. An example of a more accurate and favorable media representation of people with schizophrenia is the movie "The Boss Is the Patient" which was produced in a cooperation of the Media Cell in Michalovce (Slovakia) and "Irrsinnig Menschlich e.V." (Leipzig, Germany) by clients from Germany and Slovakia.

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