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Exploration of mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students

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Abstract---The study was conducted to explore the extent of mental health awareness and stigma associated with it. For this purpose, a sample of 200 college students in the age range from 19-23 years was taken. The sample was further divided on the basis of area differences viz. rural and urban. Data was collected using mental health literacy scale (O'Connor & Casey, 2015) and attitude scale for mental illness scale (Ng & Chan, 2002). Results revealed that there is a negative correlation between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness. It was also revealed that there exist significant area differences in this regard. Urban population scored higher on mental health literacy and lower on stigma associated with mental illness as compared to their rural counterparts. Additionally, it was also found that significant gender differences exist on both of these variables. Girls scoring higher on mental health awareness while boys scoring higher on stigma related to mental health.

Keywords---mental health awareness, stigma, mental illness, good health, well-being.

Introduction

Mental Health is an integral part of an individual's life. The World Health Organization's conceptualization of health mentions the importance this aspect of health holds in an individual's life. WHO states that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The organization has also put forward alarming statistics about the condition of mental health of the Indian Population. It has estimated India has 2443 disability-adjusted life years per 100, 00 of its population. The scenario of treatment available for mental health problems is also significantly lower in less-

developed countries like India (Srivastava et al., 2016). Major reason behind these dire statistics is less awareness about the presence of mental illnesses and the importance of mental health among the citizens. Lack of mental health education, perceived stigma, and restricted access to care are some of the barriers to recognizing mental illness and receiving the required treatment (Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2020). Stigma refresh to having a negative attitude towards people with mental illness which can lead to further exclusion and discrimination of individuals with mental illnesses. Stigma is not only harmful when it comes from people around an individual i.e. community but also is detrimental and deterrent to deal with mental health issues when it is internalized i.e. self-stigma (Pattyn et al., 2014). Experiences of stigma adversely affect the behavior as well as self-esteem of an individual (Corrigan, 2005).

Sound mental health that is away from fear of any stigma and not reluctant in seeking help when needed has numerous benefits for an individual. It helps an individual in leading a pleasant life by making him competent to deal with various emotional and psychological issues in a constructive manner (Slade, 2010). Concentrating on mental health helps improve our self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-belief along with positively impacting social and personal relationships. Mental Health and the awareness about it are extremely necessary for college going students as they are preparing to step in the real world that lie outside the protective walls of their educational institutions.

Also during this stage in their life students experience new difficulties like making independent decisions and choices about their life and career along with adapting to the academic expectations and dealing with a varied group of new individuals. Moreover, stress levels among college students and mental health issues among them is at all time high (Hernández-Torrano, et al., 2020). There is a lot to go through while dealing with an emotional state and finding a solution to deal with unwanted and overwhelming feelings. The mental health awareness and dealing with stigma associated with it is not only necessary for the students at an individual level but also as they are future of the country. If the awareness is spread and stigma is curtailed at this age it will also make them more aware and responsible citizens for tomorrow.

Attitudes towards mental health are related to the literacy they have on mental health. Mental health literacy includes the ability to recognize specific disorders, knowing how to seek mental health information, knowledge of risk factors and causes of self-treatment, and an attitude that promotes recognition and appropriate help-seeking (Jorm et al., 1997). Awareness can remove the stigma related to mental health conditions as people start to pay attention towards positive aspects associated with sound mental health. It then can lead to improvisation in intervention policies and programs for making a change in the field of mental health. The association of awareness with stigma and related outcomes makes it necessary to dive deeper into the state of mental health literacy and associated stigma among the college going population. Therefore, this study aims to explore this aspect of health among college students.

Objectives

- To explore the relationship between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among the college student population.
- To explore area differences (rural and urban) on mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students.
- To explore gender differences in mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students.

Hypotheses

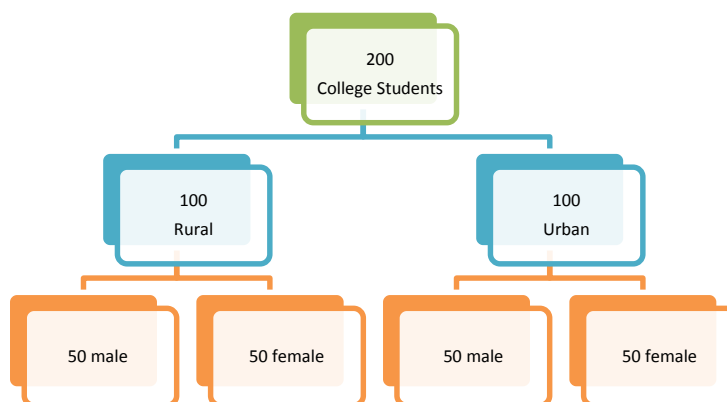
- There is no significant relationship between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students.
- There is a significant area difference (rural and urban) on mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students.
- There is a significant gender difference on mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college students.

Method

This study uses correlational research design to analyze the relationship between the variables under study. Convenience sampling technique was used for data collection. Due to COVID-19 restrictions data was collected through online mode.

Sample

A total sample of 200 college students was taken 100 (50 male and 50 female) from rural areas and 100 (50 male and 50 female) from urban areas to examine the relationship between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness. The individuals who have lived all their lives since birth in rural and urban areas respectively and were in the age-range of 19-23 years were included in the final sample. Individuals who have themselves or someone in their immediate family has received for receiving any mental health treatment were excluded from final sample as their experiences with mental health and stigma will differ from population who has no such exposure to mental health disorders and treatment. For the same reason individuals who have worked with individuals with mental health issues were also excluded from the sample.



Tools

Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS)

Mental health literacy scale is developed by O'Connor and Casey (2015). The scale consists of items 24 items. The response choices are on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from totally disagrees to totally agree. The participants indicate the extent to which the items apply or do not apply to them. The scale is psychometrically strong with a reliability coefficient of 0.797.

The Attitude Scale for Mental Illness (ASMI)

The attitude scale for mental illness was developed by Ng and Chan(2002). The scale is a self-report scale used on college students to examine their attitudes towards mental illness. The scale is based on 5 choice Likert scale ranging from 1 – totally disagree to 5- totally agree. There are 34 items in the scale. Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 signifies good internal consistency reliability.

Statistical techniques

For testing the hypotheses, the present study used statistical technique of Pearson product moment method to calculate correlation among mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness. Analysis of Variance i.e. 2x2 ANOVA was conducted to measure area and gender differences on both the variables.

Results

Table 1:- Showing correlation coefficients for Mental Health Awareness and Stigma Associated with mental Illness among college students for all sample

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	r
Mental health awareness	109.07	12.9	200	-.39**
Stigma	90.10	19.6	200	

**Significant at the 0.01 level

Significant negative correlation is found between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness ($r = -.39, p < 0.01$).

Table 2:- Showing 2 x2 ANOVA analysis for Mental Health Awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among the sample

Dependent Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	f-value
Mental Health Awareness	Gender	2402.875	1	2402.875	16.391**
	R	1109.162	1	1109.162	7.566*
	Gender xArea	812.118	1	812.118	5.540*
	Error	28732.509	196	146.594	
	Total	33179.875	199		
Stigma associated with mental illness	Gender	2298.621	1	2298.621	6.791*
	Area	7912.368	1	7912.368	23.376**
	Gender xArea	381.867	1	381.867	1.128
	Error	66341.934	196	338.479	
	Total		199		

**Significant at 0.01 level , *Significant at 0.05 level

The analysis of variance found the significant difference on the main effect of gender { $F(1, 196) = 7.56, p \leq 0.05$ }. Mean scores on gender revealed that female ($M = 112.63$) were higher than male ($M = 105.52$) college students on mental health awareness. The analysis of variance also found the significant difference on the main effect of area { $F(1, 196) = 16.4, p \leq 0.01$ }. Mean scores on area revealed that city/urban college students ($M = 111.63$) were higher than rural/village college students ($M = 106.60$) on mental health awareness. There was significant two way interaction between area and gender of college students { $F(1, 296) = 5.54, p \leq 0.05$ }. This demonstrates that on mental health awareness, area (ASI and SI) is dependent on each level of gender (male and female) and vice versa.

The analysis of variance found the significant difference on the main effect of gender { $F(1, 196) = 6.8, p \leq 0.05$ }. Mean scores on gender revealed that male ($M = 93.65$) were higher than female ($M = 86.56$) college students on stigma associated with mental illness. The analysis of variance also found the significant difference on the main effect of area { $F(1, 196) = 23.37, p \leq 0.01$ }. Mean scores on area revealed that rural/village college students ($M = 96.6$) were higher than city/urban college students ($M = 83.87$) on stigma associated with mental illness.

Discussion

Present study focused at exploring the state of mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness among college going students in India. Results revealed that there exists negative correlation between mental health awareness and stigma associated with mental illness. This finding is in line with other previous researches (Kakuma et al., 2010; Corrigan et al., 2014; Codjoe et al., 2021; Javed et al., 2021). Stigma around mental health is a result of less and misinformation. As the awareness around the topic increases the misconceptions

starts to get fade away because new information provides youngsters to analyze their existing thoughts in light of the gained information. Stigma that leads to exclusion and discrimination against people with mental illnesses (Corrigan et al., 2014) when tackled with awareness leads to acceptance and inclusion. Planning and implementation of awareness strategies does lead to expansion of campaigns that tackle stigma against people with mental health illnesses (Kakuma et al., 2013). When there is lack of awareness about issues associated with mental health people see mental illness from stigmatic viewpoint and term it as a flaw or moral weakness which results in embarrassment, privacy, and hesitancy in seeking help (Codjoe et al., 2021). However, culturally appropriate public systems increases mental health awareness and improve contact, involvement, engagement with people suffering with mental health problems (Gopalkrishnan, 2018). Awareness about mental health is critical not only for people associated with health care but also for and general community as this will ensure that people affected by mental health disorders are permitted to have a dignified life and be involved in communities, instead of being treated as castaways or untouchables (Spittel et al., 2019).

Results also revealed that significant area differences exist on both the variables under exploration. It was found that college students from urban areas are more aware about mental health and have lesser stigma towards it as compared to their rural counterparts. The results are not surprising when we have a look at studies with similar findings in other countries as well (Stewart et al., 2015; Tam Ta et al., 2016; Mutiso et al., 2017; Schroeder et al., 2021). Less awareness in rural areas owe to lack of access to better education as well as other facilities like electronic media and print media that are generally the flag bearers of change and awareness for masses (Momi & Saikia, 2017). Moreover, rural communities are more isolated within themselves as compared to urban communities because of their small size and having sub-culture that promotes lack of anonymity (Cheesmond et al., 2019) which makes it difficult to break the barrier of existing prejudices and make them aware about their misguided attitude about mental health. Even those individuals in rural areas who themselves have been treated for mental illnesses view other people who seek professional help for psychological issues in a negative light. Also due to the lack of anonymity, being viewed in negative light due to mental illnesses is inversely proportional to seeking for help for dealing with mental health issues (Rost et al., 1993). This area difference not only impact rural population while staying in their areas but also continues to have an impact on them when they move away from their homes. As students from rural areas who move away from hometown for their studies experience more maladjustment (Ecker, 2019) due to their attitude of not seeking help resulting from internalized stigma against mental health.

The study also found that there exist significant gender differences on mental health awareness as well as stigma associated with mental illness as girls scored better on awareness and lower on stigma than college going boys. The findings supported by previous researches as well (Chandra et al., 2006; Cotton et al., 2006; Cook & Wang, 2010; Holman, 2015; Wong, 2016). The reason for these differences can lie in socialization and the characteristics that are usually associated with both the genders across cultures. Girls are taught early on to look after others and be mindful of other people's situations and problems. This might

make them to look for and accept information coming to them about mental health without much hesitation. Also, the reason might lie in masculinity equated with being 'tough', strong and seeking help (Sagar-Ouriaghli, 2020) which makes boys ignore the information in support of mental health more easily to keep this masculine image intact. Girls also are not discouraged to show their emotional side and are even encouraged to do so (Chaplin, 2015) which give them a chance to be more in sync with their emotions and psychological health and they are more aware about detecting the changes in moods and related psychological issues.

Girls are also found to be low on stigma related to mental illness. One reason for the same is explained by the first finding of the study which shows that mental awareness and stigma has an inverse relationship and girls are found to be higher on mental health and awareness, thus, they have low levels of associated stigma. Also as noticed earlier girls are encouraged to always look for others and help them in need which enhances empathetic understanding among them as altruism tends to predict empathy among individuals (Vinayak & Judge, 2018). Due to their empathetic nature girls are more likely to understand the predicament of individuals suffering from mental health issues and not hold stigmatic notions against them. Moreover, it has also been found that men receive more stigma if they are diagnosed with any mental health related issue (Brekke et al., 2017) owing to this difference men might themselves also hold this stigma more strongly against others as compared to women.

Conclusion

From the above findings it can be concluded that low mental health awareness is negatively related with stigma associated with mental illness. Also students from rural areas and male students are more likely to hold stigma against mental health illness and being less aware about mental health in general. These findings make it necessary for parents, schools as well as governments to develop awareness programmes that educate the younger generation regarding mental health issues and help them to develop more positive outlook towards people suffering from any such issue. The awareness programmes can be done through one on one workshop as well as by initiating dialogue in the space of mass and social media as both of these means of information spread are popular with college going students. Awareness can also be increased by increasing the number of professionals made available and accessible for students to seek needed information.

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