Qualitative Narrative Framework as Tool for Reduction of Stigma and Prejudice

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Abstract : Mental health has become an increasingly important topic in society in recent years, not least due to the challenges posed by the corona pandemic. Along with this, the public has become more and more aware that a lack of enlightenment and proper coping mechanisms may result in a notable risk to develop mental disorders. Yet, there are still many biases against those affected, which are further connected to issues of stigmatization and societal exclusion. One of the main strategies to combat these forms of prejudice and stigma is to induce intergroup contact. More specifically, the Intergroup Contact Theory states engaging in certain types of contact with members of marginalized groups may be an effective way to improve attitudes towards these groups. However, due to the persistent prejudice and stigmatization, affected individuals often do not dare to speak openly about their mental disorders, so that intergroup contact often goes unnoticed. As a result, many people only experience conscious contact with individuals with a mental disorder through media. As an analogy to the Intergroup Contact Theory, the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis proposes that repeatedly being exposed to positive media representations of outgroup members can lead to a reduction of negative prejudices and attitudes towards this outgroup. While there is a growing body of research on the merit of this mechanism, measurements often only consist of 'positive' or 'negative' parasocial contact conditions (or examine the valence or quality of the previous contact with the outgroup); meanwhile, more specific conditions are often neglected. The current study aims to tackle this shortcoming. By scrutinizing the potential of contemporary series as a narrative framework of high quality, we strive to elucidate more detailed aspects of beneficial parasocial contact -for the sake of reducing prejudice and stigma towards individuals with mental disorders. Thus, a two-factorial between-subject online panel study with three measurement points was conducted (N = 95). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups, having to watch episodes of either a series with a narrative framework of high (Quality-TV) or low quality (Continental-TV), with one-week interval in-between the episodes. Suitable series were determined with the help of a pretest. Prejudice and stigma towards people with mental disorders were measured at the beginning of the study, before and after each episode, and in a final follow-up one week after the last two episodes. Additionally, parasocial interaction (PSI), quality of contact (QoC), and transportation were measured several times. Based on these data, multivariate multilevel analyses were performed in R using the lavaan package. Latent growth models showed moderate to high increases in QoC and PSI as well as small to moderate decreases in stigma and prejudice over time. Multilevel path analysis with individual and group levels further revealed that a qualitative narrative framework leads to a higher quality of contact experience, which then leads to lower prejudice and stigma, with effects ranging from moderate to high.

Keywords : prejudice, quality of contact, parasocial contact, narrative framework

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