

The Impact of Psychopathology Course on Students' Attitudes towards Mental Illness

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Abstract : Background: Negative attitudes towards the mentally ill are widespread and a cause for concern as they have a detrimental impact on individuals affected by mental illness. A possible avenue for changing attitudes towards mental illness is through mental health literacy. In a college or university setting, an abnormal psychology course may be introduced in an attempt to change student's attitudes towards the mentally ill. Objective: To determine if and how students' attitudes towards the mentally ill change as a result of taking a course in abnormal psychology. Methods: Twenty nine (29) students were recruited from an abnormal psychology class at the University of Botswana. Attitude Scale for Mental Illness (ASMI) questionnaire was administered to participants at the beginning and end of the semester. SPSS was employed to analyze data. Pooled means were used to determine whether the student's attitudes towards mental illness were negative or positive. A mean of 2.5 translated to negative attitude for both total attitude and attitudes in different domains of the scale. Paired sample t-test was then used to assess whether any changes noted in attitudes were statistically significant or not. Statistical significance was assumed at $p < 0.05$. Results: Students' general attitude towards mental illness remained positive although the pooled mean value increased from 2.08 to 2.24. The change was not statistically significant. In relation to different sub scales, the values of the pooled means for all the sub scales showed an increase although the changes were not statistically significant except for the Stereotyping sub scale ($p = 0.031$). The stereotyping domain reflected a statistically significant change in student's attitude from positive attitude to negative ($X^2 = 2.06$ to $X^2 = 2.55$). For the pessimistic prediction domain, students consistently showed a negative attitude ($X^2 = 3.34$ to $X^2 = 3.55$). The other 4 domains indicated that students had positive attitude toward mentally ill throughout. Discussion: Abnormal psychology students have a positive attitude towards the mentally ill generally. This could be attributed to the fact that all students in the abnormal psychology course are majoring in psychology and research has shown that interest in psychology can affect one's attitude towards mental illness. The students continuously held the view that people with mental illness are unlikely to improve as evidenced by a high score for Pessimistic prediction domain for both pre and post-test. Students initially had no stereotyping attitude towards the mentally ill, but at the end of the course, they were of the opinion that people with mental illness can be defined in a certain behavioural pattern and mental ability. This results could be an indication that students have learnt well how to differentiate abnormal from normal behaviour not necessarily that students had developed a negative attitude. Conclusion: A course in abnormal psychology does have an impact on the students' attitudes towards the mentally ill. The impact does not solely depend on knowledge of mental illness but also on several other factors such as contact with the mentally ill, interest in psychology, and teaching methods. However, it should be noted that sometimes improved knowledge in mental illness can be misunderstood for a negative attitude. For example, stereotyping attitudes may be a reflection of the ability to differentiate between abnormal and normal behaviour.

Keywords : attitudes, mental illness, psychopathology, students

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