College Students' Perceptions of Stigma Surrounding Depression and Anxiety

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Background

An increasing aspect of diversity in higher education is disability, with a challenge being lower retention rates of students with disabilities as compared to students without disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2015). A large part of the issue with retention of these students is the concern for the campus environment and attitude towards students with disabilities, or stigma. Studying stigma from both the perspectives of students with disabilities as well as students without disabilities is key to a holistic understanding of stigma (Fleming et al., 2017).

A high comorbidity rate of 87% between depression and anxiety (D&A) indicates the importance of studying the two disorders in tandem rather than as separate issues (Sahoo & Khess, 2010). Further, given the increasing numbers of students who report having depression and/or anxiety on self-report surveys such as the National Collegiate Health Assessment (NCHA, 2018), it is important to explore college students' perceptions of these disorders, and more specifically, the prevalence of stigma towards these disorders.

The **purpose** of this study is to explore the prevalence of D&A on the UWEC campus and student experience with stigma surrounding D&A.

Method

Participants
A total of 179 undergraduate college students (37 males, 137 females, and 5 other; 79 first-years, 46 sophomores, 26 juniors, 23 seniors, 5 fifth-year or more) participated in this study.

Materials
Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Inventory – 9-item version (ISMI-9; Hammer & Toland, 2017); *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Strongly Agree* (4).

This scale was modified to reflect first- or third-person perspectives of depression and anxiety:

- 1st person depression inventory sample item:
  - "Stereotypes about depression apply to me."
- 1st person anxiety inventory sample item:
  - "People without anxiety could not possibly understand me."
- 3rd person depression inventory sample item:
  - "People with depression must feel out of place in the world."
- 3rd person anxiety inventory sample item:
  - "I avoid getting close to people who have anxiety."

Procedure
Participants were recruited through the Psychology Department online participation system (SONA) and completed the measure in an online (Qualtrics) context. Each participant completed two versions of the ISMI-9, one assessing stigma towards depression and the other assessing stigma towards anxiety. Depending on their self-reported depression and/or anxiety experience, participants answered questions from either a first- or third-person perspective.

Results

Frequency of Self-Reported Depression and Anxiety (N=179)

	Frequency
Self-Report Depression Only	5 (2.8%)
Self-Report Anxiety Only	53 (29.6%)
Self-Report Both Depression and Anxiety	45 (25.1%)
Self-Report Neither Depression nor Anxiety	76 (42.5%)

Means, SD, and 95% CI for Depression-Related Stigma

	M (SD)	95% CI
Students with Depression	2.26 (0.49)	2.12, 2.40
Students without Depression	2.12 (0.33)	2.06, 2.18

Means, SD, and 95% CI for Anxiety-Related Stigma

	M (SD)	95% CI
Students with Anxiety	2.00 (0.53)	1.90, 2.10
Students without Anxiety	2.04 (0.32)	1.96, 2.12

Conclusions

Prevalence
- More than half (57%) of the participants in this study self-reported depression or anxiety, and 25% of the participants self-reported <u>both</u> depression and anxiety. These findings support previous work demonstrating high comorbidity between depression and anxiety (Sahoo & Khess, 2010).
- Although 57% of participants in this study self-reported depression and/or anxiety, only 10% of the participants reported being registered with the Office for Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). This discrepancy indicates that numerous students who may benefit from the services the SSD offers may not be receiving necessary accommodations or may not be aware of the services offered by the SSD office.

Stigma
- Collapsing across disability prevalence, UWEC students report mild internalized stigma for depression, and minimal to no stigma for Anxiety.
- Students with depression tend to report more depression-related stigma than do students without depression. However, this difference is not statistically significant.
- The difference in anxiety-related stigma between students with anxiety and students without anxiety is negligible.

Limitations
- One limitation of this study is that the survey did not specify that participants had to have an official diagnosis of either depression or anxiety. This may indicate that a portion of the participants are self-diagnosing psychological illness.

Future Directions
- We would like to see the present study expanded to account for type of diagnosis (formal vs self-report).
- We also believe that the same stigma scale could be used for a wide variety of student disabilities on the UWEC campus.

References

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