

European College of Neuropsychopharmacology – press release

## ***UK study shows there is less stigma against LGBTQ people than you might think, but people with mental health problems continue to experience higher levels of stigma***

*Stigma: a set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

**Embargo until: 00.05 CEST (Milan) Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2024**

Type of research: not peer reviewed/survey/people

A study of stigma against LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people in British society has shown that there is less stigma against these groups that might be expected from social and media perceptions. The same study looked at stigma against people with mental health problems and discovered that they continue to experience higher levels of stigma. This work will be presented at the ECNP conference in Milan. This is an advance press release <sup>see note below</sup>.

Researcher Professor Karen Ersche (University of Cambridge) said, *“Our aim was to look at the level of stigma against LGBTQ people in British society, and also to look at stigma against people with mental health problems. This is the first such survey to compare what society thinks to what individuals think about minority groups, the results surprised us”*.

The researchers carried out 2 separate studies, measuring stigma via the Perceived Discrimination and Devaluation Scale\*. They first questioned 264 people about how mental health problems are perceived by society. The researchers also broke down the answers according to whether or not the respondents had experienced close contact with people with mental health problems or not. They then asked how they personally felt about people with mental health problems.

For the second part of the study, the researchers asked 124 people similar questions about how they felt society would perceive LGBTQ people, and how they themselves felt about them.

Researcher Mr Charlie Evans (University of Cambridge), who conducted the study, said, *“It’s difficult for people to admit to any prejudice against a particular group, so we first asked participants what levels of stigma exists in society- this gave them a reference point In each case, we found that respondents perceived society to be less accepting of LGBTQ orientation or mental health problems than they themselves were.*

*We found that the societal level of stigma against LGBTQ people was less than we might have expected. Personal and societal stigma against LGBTQ people is less than the level perceived against people with mental health problems.*

*I think this throws up two questions. Why is societal mental health stigma perceived more strongly than LGBTQ stigma? And why do people with mental health problems self-stigmatise more than LGBTQ people? Perhaps this has something to do with the*

*idea that a mental health problem is experienced as a personal deficit rather than an identity; there are no ‘mental health pride’ celebrations for example.*

*Our work may suggest that different approaches are needed to reduce stigma. It seems awareness campaigns have helped reduce LGBTQ stigma, given that prior contact with LGBTQ people tends to reduce stigma, but this effect is less marked with mental health stigma. We need to be open in looking for what works with overcoming mental health stigma. It may also be useful to undertake similar studies throughout Europe, to understand what level of stigma exists in different countries.”*

Commenting, Professor Pedro Morgado (School of Medicine, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal).said:

*“The most relevant finding of the study is the existence of significant stigma both against LGBTQ people and against people with mental illness. These are early results and should be interpreted with caution, considering the risk of minimizing the severe impacts (also on mental health) of stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ people. Of course, LGBTQ issues relate to a stable and defining characteristic of individuals, whereas mental illness refers to a pathology.*

*“Even though the results cannot be generalized beyond the UK, they show that the work being done in the fight against LGBTQ discrimination produces positive outcomes and should be continued and deepened. So, I would welcome studies on stigma from other countries. Regarding mental illness, interventions to reduce stigma should leverage some of the models used in LGBTQ issues, contributing to greater visibility of people with mental illness, increased knowledge about the diseases, and a better understanding of their nature and impacts” .*

*Dr Morgado (<https://icvs.uminho.pt/member/pedro-morgado/>) was not involved in this work, this is an independent comment.*

#### **Notes**

\*See Perceived Discrimination and Devaluation Scale:

<https://supp.apa.org/psycarticles/supplemental/prj0000142/prePRJ20141264Self.pdf>

This work will be presented on Monday 23rd Sept at 12.35. Session PS05.

#### **Notes for Editors**

This work is presented at the 37<sup>th</sup> ECNP Congress, taking place in Milan and online 21-24 September 2024, see <https://www.ecnp.eu/Congress2024/ECNPcongress>. With more than 6,500 participants the ECNP Congress is Europe’s leading platform for the latest research in disease-related neuroscience.

#### **Conference Abstract, number P2227: LGBTQ stigma: perceived in the eye of the beholder?**

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## Background

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) issues are growing ever more salient, in both research and day-to-day settings across Europe. LGBTQ issues are regularly mentioned in news and policy discussions, with LGBTQ stigma commonly recognised as biopsychosocially detrimental [1], and LGBTQ experiences varying heterogeneously from recent marriage equality in Greece to reduced legal protections in Poland. Despite this, there is general neglect for the ways in which LGBTQ people perceive their own stigmatisation. Considering the development of other social stigmas across the past century, such as with mental health conditions, there are questions around how LGBTQ stigmatisation may socially develop; questions further arise around the basis of this stigma, or if it may even be a cognitive stigmatisation, rather than being politically or threat motivated. The aim of this study was to measure how LGBTQ stigma is perceived by in- and out-group members, with comparison to mental health stigma. We hypothesise that LGBTQ and mental health stigma exist at similar levels, and further hypothesise that personal stigma is dependent on familiarity with the stigmatised group.

## Methods

Using the Perceived Discrimination and Devaluation Scale [2] we measured perceived stigma towards people with mental health conditions in an online sample ( $n=264$ ). For each item, participants were asked how much they believed *most people* would agree or disagree, and how much they *personally* agreed. In a separate online study ( $n=124$ ), we replaced *mental illness* with *LGBTQ people* for each item. Data were collected using Prolific Academic, with inclusion criteria of British residency and a minimum age of 18 years old. Participants were subdivided according to their relationship with either mental health conditions or LGBTQ orientations (unfamiliar, familiar, personally affected). Analysis-of-covariance, with age as a co-variate, was used to compare societal and personal stigma between each familiarity subgrouping.

## Results

Our results for both samples reveal a significant reduction in personally-held, compared to societally-perceived, stigma, which is expected given the social undesirability of negative attitudes. Contrary to our first hypothesis, we found that the overall level of societal stigma against mental illness (mean=43.7) was notably higher than stigma against LGBTQ people (mean=32.5). Consistent with our second hypothesis, we found that personally held stigma varied, dependent on whether participants knew someone with, or were personally affected by a mental illness ( $F_{2,260}=5.19, p=0.006$ ) or knew someone who was, or were themselves, LGBTQ ( $F_{2,120}=25.62, p<0.001$ ).

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that LGBTQ stigma in the UK may not be as high as one might presume from current political and social debates. It remains unclear as to why stigma against LGBTQ people appears to be perceived less in society than that against mental illness. Possibly potential heterogeneous motivational factors are underpinning these stigmas; whilst LGBTQ and mental health have both been previously pathologised, being LGBTQ is now regarded more as a stable character trait, where mental health is still regarded as a health deficit, and thus may be more stigmatised.

## References:

- [1] Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Lattanner, M. R., McKetta, S., Pachankis, J. E., 2024. Structural stigma and LGBTQ+ health: a narrative review of quantitative studies. *The Lancet Public Health* 9(2), 109-127.
- [2] Link, B. G., Cullen, F. T., Struening, E., Shrout, P. E., & Dohrenwend, B. P., 1989. A modified labeling theory approach to mental disorders: An empirical assessment. *American sociological review* 54(3), 400-423.

## Funding and disclosures:

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