Worksheet 5.1

The causes and effects of stigma

It seems that the public have misunderstood what effects psychological disorders have on those who live with them. This is partly because of a lack of information and partly because of sources of misinformation. The media is often blamed. For example, Mullen (1997) describes how news headlines report that a criminal has a history of mental illness or has spent time in a psychiatric institution, but do not report other types of contact with medical systems in the offender’s past. In addition, those with mental illnesses are characterized as homicidal maniacs, rebellious free spirits, female seductresses, enlightened members of society, narcissistic parasites, or zoo specimens (Hyler et al., 1991). There is evidence that those who have close relationships with people who have psychological disorders quite logically have more positive and realistic attitudes (Read and Law, 1999).

One of the most interesting and somewhat paradoxical causes of stigma is actually the typically biomedical orientation of many traditional anti-stigma campaigns. While encouraging the public to consider mental illness as being like any other illness originally seemed like a positive approach that people would relate to, there is evidence that taking this approach has actually encouraged the belief that behaviour is outside the control of a person with a psychiatric diagnosis, and that genes and medication share control. Along with this come beliefs that such a person is more unpredictable and dangerous to others and a fear of being close to the person (Read et al., 2006). This affects professionals as well as the public (consider the Rosenhan study on p. 151), and it seems that alternatives which emphasize that people with psychiatric diagnoses are understandable, and that their behaviour is a reasonable response to problems in life, are associated with much more positive attitudes (Read, 2007). A number of anti-stigma campaigns now take this approach, often asking well-known personalities to assist, for example the Time to Change campaign in the United Kingdom, which benefitted from the assistance of Stephen Fry.

Why does such stigma matter? There are several reasons beyond basic human rights to dignity and fair treatment by others. One of these is that stigma discourages people from seeking help when they need it, or even admitting to friends and family that they are having trouble – out of fear of receiving a diagnosis that alienates them, a problem exacerbated by differences in the cultural significance of diagnosis in multicultural societies (Yang et al., 2008). A study of the effects of stigma on those with psychiatric illnesses by Markowitz (1998) indicates that the experience of stigma reduces life satisfaction and increases anxiety and depression symptoms. When it seems that the majority of people do not harbour negative attitudes towards people who have psychological disorders, and that stigma is damaging, it is clearly worthwhile to invest in effective anti-stigma campaigns.
References


1 Make a short list of the causes and effects of stigma identified above.

2 Carry out your own informal investigation of the portrayal of those with psychological disorders in the media. If you are in a class, you could approach this in groups, one group addressing television news, another looking at newspapers, another looking at film and so on. If you can gather data (such as newspaper articles or news clips from television) as a class, Higher Level students could then apply their Paper 3 content analysis skills and extract themes from the data to establish whether the portrayals described above are relevant for the media in your country.