



Experiences of discrimination and the feelings of loneliness in people with psychotic disorders: The mediating effects of self-esteem and support seeking

P. Świtaj^{a,*}, P. Grygiel^b, M. Anczewska^a, J. Wciórka^a

^aFirst Department of Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, Warsaw, Poland

^bEducational Research Institute, Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

Objective: People with psychotic disorders frequently become targets of discrimination, which may have devastating effects on their social relations and lead to the feelings of loneliness. This study has explored whether self-esteem and support seeking serve as mediators in the relationship between experiences of discrimination and loneliness.

Methods: A total of 110 persons with psychotic disorders (*International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision (ICD-10): F20–F29*) were evaluated with self-report measures of discrimination experiences, self-esteem, support seeking and loneliness. The relationships between variables were examined with path modeling. Bootstrap mediation analyses were used for testing the statistical significance of indirect effects.

Results: Experiences of discrimination have been demonstrated to increase the level of loneliness both directly and indirectly. The indirect effect of discrimination on loneliness via self-esteem decrement has been proven to be significant. Support has been also found for a mediation model in which discrimination experiences negatively affect self-esteem, an undermined self-esteem diminishes the tendency to seek social support, and reduced support seeking worsens the sense of loneliness. However, discrimination experiences and support seeking have turned out to be unrelated and thus the hypothesized indirect effect of discrimination on loneliness through the weakening of the willingness to seek social support has not been confirmed by the data.

Conclusions: The findings contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms through which experiences of discrimination aggravate perceived social isolation. Self-esteem and the tendency to seek social support have emerged as possible targets for interventions aiming to counteract the negative influence of rejection experiences on social relationships of people with psychotic disorders.

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1. Introduction

People with mental illness throughout the world frequently become targets of discrimination (i.e. rejecting and avoidant behavior), which can exert profound negative impact on most areas of their lives [1,2]. While the forms of interpersonal rejection and discrimination may be numerous, their common feature is that they all pose a threat to the sense of belonging of target individuals [3]. As Baumeister and Leary [4] point out, the need to belong (i.e. the desire for interpersonal attachments) is a fundamental human motivation. An important consequence of the failure to satisfy this need may be a painful feeling of loneliness [5].

Loneliness can be described as “a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships” [6]. This phenomenon is related, above all, to the failure to satisfy the need for intimacy, and it arises on the basis of the differences between ideal and actually perceived interpersonal relationships. It is basically a subjective experience and, as such, should be distinguished from social isolation, which concerns the objective characteristics of the situation and refers to the absence of relationships with other people [7]. Socially isolated persons are not necessarily lonely, and vice versa. In other words, loneliness is perceived social isolation, rather than actual social isolation.

Most people at least occasionally experience loneliness [5], yet individuals with mental illness are among the groups particularly exposed to its severe and persistent forms [8–11]. The clinical relevance of loneliness lies primarily in the fact

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +48 22 8424034; fax: +48 22 4582818.
E-mail address: switaj@ipin.edu.pl (P. Świtaj).

that it is an established risk factor for numerous negative health outcomes, including substance abuse, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, suicidality, poorer immune and cardiovascular functioning, and increased mortality [5,12]. Thus, the intensification of feelings of loneliness may be one of the important routes by which the experience of discrimination impedes the process of recovery in people with mental illness. However, the exact mechanisms and mediators of the impact of mental health discrimination on the sense of loneliness are not clear. Their identification would certainly be helpful in designing effective programs and interventions promoting recovery among service users.

One possible factor mediating the effects of discrimination on loneliness is self-esteem, since diminished self-esteem has repeatedly been found to be the outcome of rejection experiences [13–16] and, at the same time, has been identified as a condition predisposing a person to loneliness [5]. Another presumed mediator worth investigating is the tendency to seek social support. Support seeking, i.e. an individual's preference to request help from others in times of need, is considered an active and mostly adaptive strategy for coping with stressful events [17]. It has been argued that it can be particularly useful for individuals who have experienced rejection, because it helps them to restore a sense of belonging [3], which is essentially the opposite of loneliness [7]. Yet, experiences of rejection may drive people with mental illness to anticipate further rejection and have been found to be associated with the endorsement of defensive coping strategies, such as keeping one's illness secret and withdrawal from social interactions [14]. Hence, it seems probable that experienced discrimination may indirectly aggravate the sense of loneliness through the weakening of the willingness to seek social support.

The relationships between the two hypothetical mediators need to be considered as well. First, it should be noted that both theory and some empirical evidence suggest that individuals with positive self-evaluations are likely to select active and adaptive coping strategies [18]. On the other hand, diminished self-esteem resulting from stigma and discrimination has been shown to contribute to the increase of the probability of dysfunctional avoidant coping and social

avoidance/withdrawal in people with mental illnesses [19,20]. Given this, a mediation model can be postulated in which discrimination experiences negatively affect self-esteem, whereas lowered self-esteem reduces the use of a beneficial coping strategy of seeking social support, and reduced support seeking leads to the intensification of the feelings of loneliness.

Following the above considerations, in the present study, we have tested the hypothesis that self-esteem and support seeking act as mediators in the relationships between experiences of discrimination and the feelings of loneliness in people with psychotic disorders. The expected direct relationships between the study variables are depicted in Fig. 1.

We have hypothesized that discrimination experiences increase the level of loneliness and lower the tendency to seek social support and the level of self-esteem. Next, we have predicted that decreased self-esteem leads to reduced support seeking and to the intensification of the feelings of loneliness. Finally, we have assumed that the seeking of social support diminishes the sense of loneliness.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A convenience sample of service users was recruited from several mental health care facilities in Warsaw (Poland). The inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) diagnosis of non-affective psychotic disorder (*International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* (ICD-10): F20–F29), 2) age over 18 years old, 3) written, informed consent to participate in the study, and 4) a stable mental state, according to the attending psychiatrist, sufficient to understand the questions and complete the set of questionnaires accurately. Individuals with active drug or alcohol dependence, organic brain disease, severe cognitive deficits or documented mental retardation were excluded. Altogether, the study included 110 participants. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic and clinical characteristics of the sample.

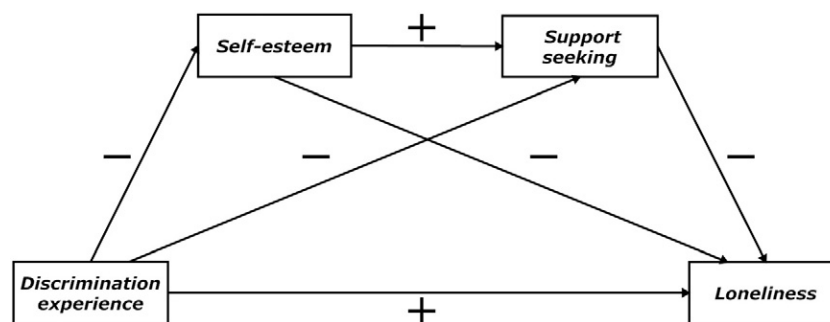


Fig. 1. Hypothesized path model of the relationships between discrimination experiences, self-esteem, support seeking and loneliness in people with psychotic disorders. Direction of expected effects is denoted by + or –.

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