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Original article

The state of the art in European research on reducing social exclusion and stigma related to mental health: A systematic mapping of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Stigma and social exclusion related to mental health are of substantial public health importance for Europe. As part of ROAMER (ROADmap for MEntal health Research in Europe), we used systematic mapping techniques to describe the current state of research on stigma and social exclusion across Europe. Findings demonstrate growing interest in this field between 2007 and 2012. Most studies were descriptive (60%), focused on adults of working age (60%) and were performed in Northwest Europe—primarily in the UK (32%), Finland (8%), Sweden (8%) and Germany (7%). In terms of mental health characteristics, the largest proportion of studies investigated general mental health (20%), common mental disorders (16%), schizophrenia (16%) or depression (14%). There is a paucity of research looking at mechanisms to reduce stigma and promote social inclusion, or at factors that might promote resilience or protect against stigma/social exclusion across the life course. Evidence is also limited in relation to evaluations of interventions. Increasing incentives for cross-country research collaborations, especially with new EU Member States and collaboration across European professional organizations and disciplines, could improve understanding of the range of underpinning social and cultural factors which promote inclusion or contribute toward lower levels of stigma, especially during times of hardship.

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1. Introduction

Stigma and social exclusion related to mental health are of substantial public health importance in Europe. Experience of mental health problems early in life can be associated with a trajectory of exclusion and disadvantage, for example, through reduced participation in higher education, exclusion from civil society (including functions such as democratic participation), increased risk of contact with criminal justice systems, victimization, less access to physical healthcare, poverty and homelessness and reduced life expectancy [16,21,26,35,42,47]. Stigma and exclusion of these kinds can directly reduce well-being and can also have significant consequences in terms of lower participation in healthcare, higher rates of mortality, higher levels of self-stigma, lower levels of empowerment and higher rates of unemployment [14,40,43]. Employment rates for people with mental health problems, for instance, are lower than those of the overall population and lower than those for people with physical health problems [25,38].

These issues may intensify at times of macro-economic adversity, as currently experienced in many European and other countries. Stigma and social exclusion of marginalized groups may increase during times of economic recession and can result in increased exclusion of people with mental health problems [10], for example in relation to employment [1,15]. Although the evidence is from outside Europe, other research has shown how relative income-related disadvantages, in relation to prevalence of mental health problems and to suicide, widen during a recession [24]. Given that recession and a poor economic outlook may be associated with a decline in population mental health and depletion of social resources associated with resilience [19,34,46], there is likely to be an increasing proportion of the population feeling the impact of the economic hardship. Thus, there is an urgent need for evidence to help us understand the mechanisms of and evidence-based

solutions for decreasing stigma and social exclusion and to improving societal participation.

The importance of stigma and social exclusion was highlighted in a recent survey of 154 national associations/organizations of stakeholder groups in Europe, undertaken as part of the ROAMER (ROADmap for MEntal health Research in Europe) project. Stigma and discrimination were considered priorities across all stakeholder groups (i.e., trainee mental health professionals, psychiatrists, other mental health professionals, service users and/or carers and trainees) [17]. The ROAMER project, which was funded under the European Commission Seventh Framework Research Programme (FP7), aims to develop a comprehensive and integrated mental health research agenda oriented to translational research and aligned with the policies of the new EU long-term research programme Horizon 2020 [23]. One part of the ROAMER project focused on social and economic issues in relation to mental health and well-being across Europe. The research underpinning this paper was designed to inform the ROAMER mental health roadmap by describing the most recent, state of the art research in relation to stigma and social exclusion. Understanding what research achievements have already been made would also help to identify existing research gaps, to understand weaknesses in the field, and hence, to ascertain which research needs might be prioritized for the future.

The overarching objective of this study was to map current research on stigma and social exclusion in relation to mental health and well-being across Europe. We had three specific aims:

- to identify where in Europe (i.e., in which countries) research on stigma and social exclusion in relation to mental health and well-being is conducted;
- to describe the type of research on stigma and social exclusion in relation to mental health in Europe (e.g., methodology, type of disorder, age groups);

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