Brief Report

Self-esteem as mediator and moderator of the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation of Chinese adults with disability

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Abstract

Background: Several studies show the relationship between self-esteem and stigma perception and also between self-esteem and social alienation, but none sufficiently analyze the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation of people with disability.

Objective/hypothesis: The primary aim of this paper is to investigate the mediator and moderator effects of self-esteem on the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation of people with disability.

Methods: The participants were 129 adults with disability (80 males and 49 females) from eight communities in China. Data was collected by using the stigma perception scale, self-esteem scale, social avoidance scale, social anxiety subscale of the self-consciousness scale, and loneliness scale. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

Results: Stigma perception was positively correlated with social avoidance ($p < 0.001$), social anxiety ($p < 0.001$), and loneliness ($p < 0.001$). Self-esteem was inversely correlated with social avoidance ($p < 0.001$), social anxiety ($p < 0.001$), loneliness ($p < 0.001$), and stigma perception ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: Self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between stigma perception and social avoidance, social anxiety and loneliness. Moreover, self-esteem moderated the relationship between stigma perception and social avoidance, but not on social anxiety and loneliness. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Chinese adults with disability; Stigma perception; Social alienation; Self-esteem

In recent years, the objective living environment of people with disability has been greatly improved in China, such as income, education, employment and disabled facilities, but participation in social activity of person with disability has never been improved. According to the report of the 2010 national disability status and well-off process monitoring, the proportion of people with disability participating in community culture and sports is still low, with the proportion of frequently participating around 5% and the proportion of occasionally participating less than 30%. Nearly two thirds of them hardly went out of the house and into society. So, the social alienation trend of people with disability is obvious in China.

Social alienation (SA) is a psychological and behavioral expression of automatic estrangement and isolation that comes from the potential effect of individual social action based on negative attitude due to lack of overall cognition.[1] SA contains an objective and a subjective evaluation. The objective evaluation of SA is social avoidance, which is an objective reflection of social interaction.[2] The subjective evaluation of SA is social anxiety and loneliness, which is the subjective feeling of dissatisfaction with a low number of social contacts.[3,4]

Social alienation of people with disability also separates them from social groups, and marginalizes them in the peer group. As some research indicates, people with disability tend toward isolation and social avoidance resulting in the inability to establish good interpersonal relationships with others[5,6] and few people are willing to make friends with them.[7,8] Moreover, social alienation also leads to many psychological adaptation problems, including loneliness, anxiety and inferiority[9–11] and a series of other problems, such as mental health issues[9,11] and internet addiction.[12,13]

Stigma perception, as an important predictive variable of social alienation[14–18] is a sensitivity perception that is perceived from negative behavior or attitudes (such as injustice, injury and refusal). A reported that 62% of person with disability said they have experienced stigmatization from peers to the point that their friendships have disintegrated, and 46% from their family, resulting in behaviors such as distrust and lack of sympathy and compassion, thus increasing the likelihood of loneliness, depression and reclusion.[19] Furthermore, most adults with disability said they feel a stigma and unfair treatment from others in the workplace.[20,21] It is because of stigma perception, they often doubt their social skills, or even doubt their perception of self-worth,[22,23] creating emotional problems like anxiety and depression.[24,25] Thus, stigma perception is an important variable in social alienation research of people with disability.

Self-esteem is an individual's integrity understanding of one's self-worth and one of the most predictive variables in social alienation research.[26] In some studies, self-esteem has been found to be one of the stronger predictors of social alienation.[27–29] Meanwhile, some researchers also provide evidence that there is significant correlation between stigma perception and self-esteem[23,30] and stigma perception also impacts the level of individual's depression by decreasing self-esteem[16,31,32] So self-esteem of person with disability is an intermediate variable between stigma perception and social alienation.

The aim of this study is to test the role of self-esteem as an intervening variable in the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation in Chinese adults with disability through two alternative models. In the mediational model, whether self-esteem functions as a mediator between stigma perception and social alienation has been examined. In light of the reciprocal relationships between self-esteem, stigma perception and social alienation that have been established by previous studies, it was predicted in the current study that as stigma perception decreases, social alienation will also decrease and self-esteem will have an indirect role in this decrease. A meta-analytical study has shown that treatment programs directed at improving self-concept lead to positive changes in different adjustment areas.[33] Some studies show that self-esteem plays a moderating function between psychological distress and some psychological variables (e.g., perceived inequity, discrimination, perceived sexist events, social rejection) in both adults and youth.[34–36] As mentioned before, self-esteem is strongly related to both stigma perception and social alienation in people with disability. Self-esteem may not only serve as a mediator between stigma perception and social alienation, it may also have a "buffer" role[37] which decreases the negative effect of stigma perception on social alienation as a moderator. Therefore, in the moderational model of this study, it was predicted that the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation in the individual with disability with high self-esteem

would be smaller compared to the one with low self-esteem. In summary, the aim of this study is to examine whether self-esteem plays a moderating and mediating role in the relationship between stigma perception and social alienation in people with disability in China.

Method

Participants

The participants were 129 adults with disability (80 males and 49 females) from eight communities in Ningbo, a mid-sized city in the southern part of China. The age rang was 21–79 years (*M* = 49.97, SD = 10.97).

Measures

The stigma perception scale (DSPS)
The DSPS[16] consists of ten items. Each item is answered on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of stigma perception. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the DSPS was 0.89.

The social alienation scale (SAS)
The social avoidance scale[2] consists of fourteen items, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social avoidance. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the SAS was 0.77.

The social anxiety scale[38] consists of six items, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social anxiety. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the SAS was 0.78.

The loneliness scale[39] consists of eight items which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of loneliness. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the LS was 0.90.

The self-esteem scale (SES)
The SES[26] consists of ten items which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the SES was 0.79.

Procedure

129 adults with disability from the eight communities were randomly selected. Self-report questionnaires were completed in the classroom after informing consent. It took approximately 25 min to complete all the instruments.