

STIGMATIZATION AND MENTAL WELL-BEING: CASE STUDY OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN HAMBANTHOTA DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

People are indispensable resources for society. Therefore, their physical and mental fitness is expected to be properly applied to anything. But even if they have the ability, another person works to trap them in a certain frame of society due to certain shortcomings of the people. Over the past 50 years, mental health and the quality and effectiveness of those services have been improved greatly. But, many people who can benefit from these don't get them and don't continue to get treatment because of the stigma. Social Cognitive processes help prevent mental illness when people engage in mental health care. But, people face stigma because of their physical, mental illness or disabilities. Through that, their self-esteem decreases, and they are identified as mentally ill in society. It directly affects their mental health. Recurring incidents like this cause them to have mental breakdowns. People suffering from mental illness or disabilities are more stigmatized than people with other health conditions (Corrigan et al. (2000)). Korir (2015) found that such students face challenges in social life outside the academic field, such as; teachers ignore the special needs of visually impaired and blind students, students with visual impairments being lonely or less recognized by other students in class and visually impaired students have problems in making friends. Accordingly, it is clear that blind people are discriminated in the workplaces and education field when compared to people without disabilities.

Even though many empirical studies have been conducted to investigate how people are stigmatized due to mental illness (Corrigan et al. (2000), Samarasekara et al. (2012), Gibbs & Gambrill (2002)) still, studies haven't been done in Sri Lanka, addressing the mental health of visually impaired students in education sectors. To address this gap, the researcher aims to identify the impact of stigmatization on the mental health of visually impaired students in the education sector in Sri Lanka.

Mental health refers to the state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with life's stressors, realize their potential, learn and work well, and contribute to their communities (World Health Organization, 2018). Mental health consists of our emotional, mental and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act (Mental Health Government, 2022). Roldán-Merino et al. (2017) noted that, Positive mental health is structured in a multifactorial model consisting of 6 factors used as dimensions of mental health. They are personal satisfaction, prosocial attitude, self-control, autonomy, problem-solving & self-actualization, and interpersonal relationship skills.

Stigma is denoted for physical signs that reveal something unusual and negative about a person's moral status (Bhugra & Cutter, 2004). Mukolo et al. (2010) found that three dimensions of stigma (negative stereotypes, devaluation, and discrimination). Stereotypes define as knowledge structures that the general public learns about a marked social group (Patrick, 2000). Stuart (2005) has noted that discrimination is the unfair or inequitable treatment of people with mental illness which results in a denial of their rights. According to

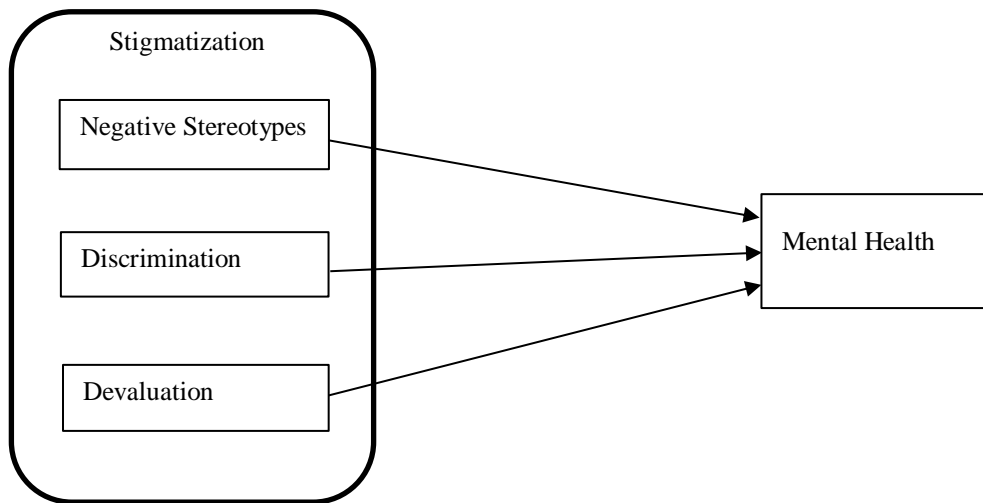
labeling theory, stigmatization is largely a sequential process that begins with labeling and (negative) stereotyping by others, which leads to separation and status loss or (devaluation) of the labeled entity (Link & Phelan, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

This study was deductive and qualitative where the case study method and mono method were applied using the following conceptual framework as a foundation for the study. A structured interview was adopted with a pre-developed interview guide which had ten open questions specifically designed for stigmatization and mental health (Ex: How has it affected your mental well-being when you were socially isolated?) (Ma and Hsieh (2020), King et al. (2007), Björkman et al. (2007), Roldán-Merino et al. (2017)). The population of the study was 75 visually impaired students at Polommaruwa Deaf and Blind School in the Hambanthota district. The convenience sampling technique was adopted to select seven visually impaired students as the sample of the qualitative study and the researcher obtained data from the nearest Polommaruwa Deaf and Blind School. All the responses received were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

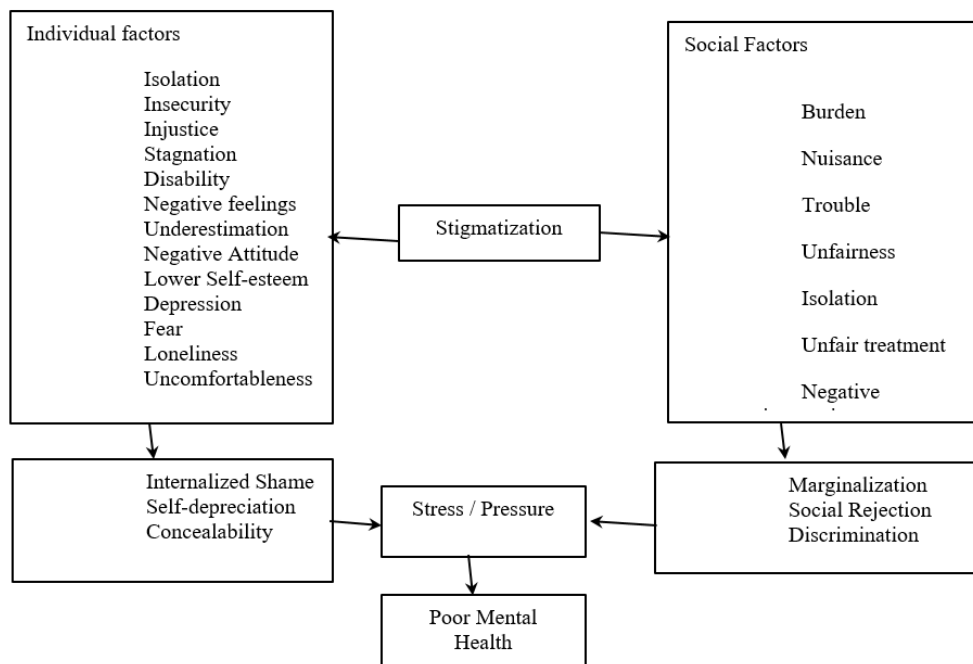


RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Accordingly, all the responses they gave stated that they have been subjected to negative stereotypes knowingly or unknowingly. *“In that school, I had a lot of differences from my best friends of the same age. There were times when they said they couldn’t take me even to play”*. Such students, who have been treated as unnecessary characters in the society, have opposite opinions on others in society, and their opinions are not acceptable to the community. All participants responded that they had been labeled by different people at some point or event. *“You’re a blind child. You can’t play. You’re not like us.”* Two of the participants in the present study have mentioned very clearly how they were discriminated by others. . Therefore, the students who responded have been discriminated and become segregated avoid the association of others *“If they are, But when we behave as if we are isolated from society, we realize that*

we are a different group from this society”, “Society has not given us a chance to go forward because they always see us as people who cannot do anything” etc. And, society has not given those students a chance to advance. Because, society itself has an opinion that disabled people cannot do anything when compared with other people. Because of that, the participants have to face withholding of opportunities. It is clearly mentioned from the above findings that students are subjected to devaluation. “They see us differently. No matter where we go or even if we go to a school, we get very few responses. That’s because, they don’t want to accept us.” Here, it is clearly explained that a person who has been subjected to devaluation will be separated from others, rejected, or lose status. Also, while engaging in friendly discussions with those students, some people talked in a different way. Previous studies have shown that physical disability causes one’s social identity to become less valuable or important. It is clear that people are subjected to negative stereotypes, discrimination, and devaluation when stigmatized. They have faced sadness, being alone, crying and being introverted, etc. Therefore, self-esteem, optimistic outlook, emotional balance, and tolerance cannot be maintained and it is not possible to maintain good mental health. Based on the qualitative data analysis, a new model was suggested for future studies for qualitative study based on the modified labeling theory. It is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2
Suggested new model for Qualitative study



CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, it is studied about the impact of stigma on the mental well-being of visually impaired students in the education sector. According to the previous researchers’ findings, people have been discriminated in the workplace and education comparing with people without disabilities. The main reason behind this situation is stigma. That stigma leads to the deterioration of the mental well-being of individuals. It can be concluded that, if the stigma has much impact on an employee or student, the mental well-being of that employee or student

will decrease, and if the stigma does not have much effect on the person, his mental well-being will improve.

Keywords: Stigmatization, negative stereotype, discrimination, devaluation, mental health, visually impaired students

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