

STUDENT RESEARCH WEEK

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Language, Stigma and Perceptions of Schizophrenia

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Abstract

The current research investigates the differential effects of noun (e.g., John is a schizophrenic) versus possessive labels (e.g., John has schizophrenia) on attitudes towards schizophrenia. While it is generally accepted that noun phrases should be avoided when describing someone with a mental illness (as the noun phrase equates the illness with the person), no research to date has demonstrated that the use of noun phrasing leads to more negative perceptions of those having disorders relative to the use of the possessive form. Moreover, no research has examined whether participant empathy interacts with noun versus possessive phrasing in the prediction of negative perceptions. It was hypothesized that, when drawing impressions of a hypothetical individual experiencing a mental disorder, noun phrasing will prime a high degree of stigma, particularly for respondents who are low in empathy. Two-hundred and twenty participants read a scenario describing a man with a history of mental illness and violent behaviour. Respondents were randomly assigned to complete a measure of stigmatizing attitudes, in which items were experimentally manipulated to include either noun labels, possessive labels, or no label—participants were asked to rate the degree to which each statement in the measure is consistent with their personal attitudes (e.g., John is an extremely dangerous individual because he has schizophrenia/is a schizophrenic.). Following the measure of stigmatizing attitudes, respondents completed a measure of empathy. Analyses will examine the pattern of negative perceptions as a function of label type and empathy level. This research stands to further clarify the deleterious effects of noun label usage as applied to those living with mental disorders. The final aim of this research is to make its findings accessible to both the psychological community and the general public via blog postings, research conferences, and through publication in a scientific journal.