Reviewer's report

Title: The Generalised Anxiety Stigma Scale (GASS): Psychometric properties in a community sample

Version: 1 Date: 31 July 2011

Reviewer: Heather Stuart

Reviewer's report:

This study offers a new measurement instrument to assess the stigma associated with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. This is a well written and interesting paper on an important issue in mental health so should be of considerable interest to the stigma researchers in the journal's readership.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. The challenge of creating a new measure is making a strong rationale that a new measure is needed, especially when none exists, as it may be argued that existing measures may be doing the job. This point could have been addressed if the authors had included a more detailed review of existing generic measures (such as the Devaluation-Discrimination Scale, some of the Attribution Questionnaires, or the Depression Stigma Scale) with some critical analysis describing why the measurement frame could not be adapted to be specific to Generalized Anxiety Disorder. This rationale is particularly important in light of the fact that many of the usual suspects emerged in themes identified in the systematic literature review (such as dangerousness, unpredictability, controllability, not a real illness). Indeed, the items used in the ‘new scale’ seem quite familiar both in content and scoring approach.

2. Secondly, I would have liked to have seen some critical reflection of potential problems with measuring personal stigma—whether the authors think it is even possible to measure personal stigma using self-report measures—in light of literature, such as Link’s demonstrating the role of social desirability bias, and in light of their own results showing respondents’ tendency minimize their own personal stigma.

3. Given that the main purpose of the paper is to test the reliability and validity of the new GASS, I would have liked to have seen more tabular results. For example, it would be helpful to see a table showing the percentages for each Likert item (including the proportion of missing data), with some comment on the distribution and potential floor or ceiling effects. With respect to the reliability analysis, it would be helpful to have more information on the performance of each item (eg: using item-rest correlations or alphas with item removed) and some comment on whether the scale could have (or perhaps should have) been shortened, given the high alphas. Finally, I would be helpful to see a table summarizing the results of the correlational analyses used to test validity.
4. In the discussion, the investigators indicated that there was acceptable test-retest reliability (even after 4 months) and that this provides support for the use of the GASS in prospective studies, including intervention trials. Test-retest reliability is not a measure of sensitivity. Given that half of the items measured how the respondent thinks others stigmatize GAD (in Link’s definition, community levels of stigma), it is unlikely that this measure would be sensitive to change. Perhaps only the personal component of the scale would be; however, it accounted for only about a quarter of the variation. Given that sensitivity was not addressed in this study, it would be prudent to leave this statement out.

Minor Essential Revisions:

1. It is not clear from the description how the GASS items were anchored to the vignette.

2. Section E of the survey contained a vignette of someone with depression followed by a parallel set of stigma measures focusing on depression. It is not clear why these were included or how they were used. The authors indicate that the “help-seeking” data is subject of a separate paper exploring help seeking for GAD, but no information is provided on the depression component of the survey.

3. Information on how the wording of the original set of items was pilot tested and refined. Also, it would be helpful for the reader to know the reading level required of respondents to complete the instrument.

4. It is not clear how missing data (if any) for the scale items was addressed in this analysis (or how it should be addressed by others who want to use this scale).

5. In the Limitations section, a comment should be included on the adequacy of the scale given that the factors explained only about half of the total variation.

6. The stated aim of the study was to develop and test the GASS. The conclusion of the study (in the text rather than the abstract) indicates that both the GASS and the GAD Social Distance Scales are promising measures. This conclusion should be reworded to be in line with the one presented in the abstract which does not refer to the GAD Social Distance Scale.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interest.