Reviewer's report

Title: Internalised stigma among patients with schizophrenia in a low income country: a cross-sectional facility-based study

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Reviewer: Philip T Yanos

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript makes a valuable contribution to the literature on internalized stigma in non-Western countries by reporting on the experience of internalized stigma among individuals in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the manuscript has several problems, which, if addressed, would strengthen the manuscript. Below are some ways that the manuscript could be improved by section.

Introduction

• General: intro could be improved to be a bit clearer and more complete, to enhance the authors’ argument for why this research is important.

• Description of what internalized/self-stigma is could be explained better.

• It is true that cross-cultural research on topics like self-stigma (particularly given the role of society/cultural beliefs in this construct), but it would be helpful to include some more detail on the importance of investigating something like stigma/self-stigma of mental illness in low-income as compared to high-income countries (e.g., theory on experience of mental illness across these cultures/countries—they touch on this in the discussion). Including this type of information will enhance the reader’s understanding of the importance of conducting this type of cross-cultural research.

• Probably the biggest gap in the intro is that it doesn’t mention substantial research on self-stigma of mental illness (e.g., studies looking at its relationship with self-esteem, treatment compliance, hopelessness, using cross-sectional, longitudinal, & meta-analysis methods)

Methods

• Why did the researchers decide to just collect data from individuals with diagnoses of schizophrenia? Why did they exclude individuals with substance use disorders? There is a vague comment about this exclusion being “necessary to achieve the objectives of the study” in the discussion, but this explanation doesn’t really make sense.

• Did participants complete the ISMI on their own, or was the questionnaire administered to them verbally?

Results

• Authors report percentage of participants who discontinued treatment due to stigma—how did they assess this? They only mention this variable in the
methods—seems necessary to know how this question was asked (e.g. “Did stigma impact your decisions to stop taking meds? Versus open-ended “What led you to decide to stop taking meds”). Later in the results, they also say they controlled for other demographic variables when investigating participants’ decision to discontinue medication—again, need to be clear about these analyses (it seems in the methods that they only asked about whether stigma specifically led participants to discontinue, in which case this analysis doesn’t really get at whether or not other reasons contributed to participants’ decision to discontinue meds)

• Authors should report reliability statistics for ISMI—particularly given that this study translated it into a new language and used it in a new population.

• Rephrase the sentences about the trend for relationship between education and self-stigma (p.11)

• The authors should more clearly identify what “the three factors” are on p.11

• Based on parts of the results, it seems that the authors divided participants into age groups. However, they do not say how/why they divided participants in this way.

• For the “Exploratory analyses of individual stigma items”—did the authors do any correction for multiple comparisons in the significant findings that they report?

• They report factor loadings, which are a bit different from past reports of the factors (although they don’t directly compare with past factor analyses). The authors should report more information about their factor analysis; their approach is only briefly mentioned in previous analyses section. I’m a bit confused, did they do exploratory factor analysis—if so, why did they decide to do this over confirmatory (given existing research on the ISMI)? They should also report fit statistics in the results. Also, did the authors use their own factors, or the factors identified in past research, in their previous analyses? In terms of organization, this section on factor analysis should be included before other results sections that use the measure (e.g., relating it to demographics and other variables). Similarly, should report on reliability of ISMI before other sections in the results.

Discussion

• The authors say that this study is “the second addressing the issue of stigma among patients with schizophrenia”—didn’t they say that the previous study in Ethiopia was with family members of people with schizophrenia, not people with schizophrenia themselves? I have not read the article that they reference, but based on its title it appears they authors should better describe the study in their introduction (or, if correctly described in the intro, they should make this comment in the discussion consistent with it).

• Not sure it’s appropriate to say that the proportion of participants with high levels of self-stigma is higher in this study (p.13)—the percentages are fairly close, and they didn’t do a significance test

• Are there other explanations in the literature for findings on outcome differences in low versus high-income countries for people with SMI?
• Authors discuss why it’s important to look at treatment adherence (e.g. most important predictor of positive outcome in other studies)—this could be included in the intro. Similar with their citation of studies on relationship between self-stigma and negative outcomes (p. 15)

• Since they mention it a few times, the authors should also cite research on the relationship between self-stigma and help-seeking attitudes/behaviors

A significant limitation of the study is that many of the variables included were assessed in a very unreliable way (e.g., "prominent psychotic symptoms" was measured through informal observation, suicid attempts through self-report, and contribution of stigma to non-adherence through self-report). The study is still valuable despite these limitations, but the authors need to be more open about this as a limitation in the discussion section.

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have not competing interests.