Attitudes towards persons with mental illness in a polarizing society

A trend study conducted by Matthias Angermeyer, Herbert Matschinger and Georg Schomerus revealed that between 1990 and 2011, while public attitudes towards the treatment of mental illnesses had improved, acceptance of persons with severe mental illness had declined (Angermeyer, Matschinger, & Schomerus, 2013). Today, against a backdrop of an increasingly polarized public opinion on minority rights, persons with mental illness seem to be at risk of even stronger stigmatization. Investigating attitudes towards persons with mental illness and understanding recent developments by doing another comprehensive survey of attitudes towards persons with mental illness seems therefore of utmost importance. Above all, however, in order to be able to improve public attitudes in social contexts where negative attitudes are particularly pronounced, new perspectives on our understanding of the stigma of mental illness are necessary.

While the concept of stigma was introduced by a sociologist, Erving Goffman (1963), the last 30 years have mostly seen research on the social psychological correlates and consequences of stigma, focusing on individual attitudes and illness perceptions. The influence of social context factors has so far been largely neglected, making it difficult to establish connections to overarching societal trends like migration, urbanization or changes in the labor market. However, stigma always occurs within a social or societal context. In this project,

which is a cooperation between Greifswald University (Georg Schomerus, PI), the Center of Public Mental Health, Gösing, (Matthias Angermeyer) and the Hanover Center for Health Communication (Eva Baumann), we want to investigate the **context and the social function of attitudes** towards people with mental illnesses in a representative sample of the general population and thus substantively broaden the scope of our trend study. To do so, we use **frame analyses**, which allows us to situate stigmatizing attitudes, experiences and knowledge bases in an immediate situational context. At the same time, frame analyses reveal possibilities to contextually change stigmatizing attitudes through '*strategic framing*'. On the other hand, we draw on the concept of **social milieus** – which we regard as groups that are connected by a comparable socioeconomic status and common values – to examine the prevalence of different framings of mental illness in different milieus with a view to identifying relevant target groups for interventions. Finally, we want to connect attitudes towards people with mental illnesses with the concept of **group-focused enmity** (Heitmeyer, 2010) in order to ascertain whether and to what extent the stigmatization of people with mental illnesses is footed in a general deprecation or rejection of minorities that are perceived to be foreign, alien or different. The project uses a **multimethod design** that includes qualitative and quantitative methods from psychiatric attitude research and communication sciences.

Angermeyer, M. C., Matschinger, H. & Schomerus, G. (2013). Attitudes towards psychiatric treatment and people with mental illness: changes over two decades. *Br J Psychiatry* 203, 146-51.
Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs.
Heitmeyer W. (2010). Krisen - Gesellschaftliche Auswirkungen, individuelle Verarbeitungen und Folgen für die Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit. In: Heitmeyer W (Hrsg). *Deutsche Zustände*. Folge 8. Berlin: Suhrkamp; 13-46.

Not least, the project allows both **longitudinal** and **international comparative analyses**. First, we will consolidate parts of the newly collected dataset with the **long-term study** on attitudes of the German general population since 1990. The resulting dataset – comprising a total of four methodologically identical, representative surveys since 1990 – is internationally unique and allows us to conduct complex statistical longitudinal analyses of attitudes (e.g., age-period-cohort analyses). The results from our trend analyses will then be compared with **trend analyses from other countries**, for example Austria. While the new cross-sectional survey examines the contextual dependency and complexity of attitudes towards people with mental illnesses, the envisaged additional comparative longitudinal analyses are intended to portray overarching attitudinal trends using already known constructs and items.

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